Pocket rocket: Astell&Kern's A&Norma SR25 MKII portable digital player

Sheer luxury: Mark Levinson's N°5909 Bluetooth/wired cans

Hi-Fi Choice

PASSION FOR SOUND

Issue No. 489 June 2022

SUPER SOUNDS

GROUP TEST

Six great budget standmount speakers face the music

NEWS EXTRA:
Launches from KEF, Melco, Klipsch, Rotel, Technics, Pro-Ject and more...

BUYING GUIDE
100+ essential components p109

DISC DIVA
A retro nod to Sony's CDP-X77ES CD spinner

Having it large

JBL's Classic L75ms wireless soundbar and heavyweight system all-in-one

COVERS STORY
The fascinating history of vinyl album artwork

"FABULOUS VALUE"

Activate your desktop with AirPulse's A80 speakers

FOX HEADS & LAWNMOWERS

We wave a fond farewell to top pop-proggers Genesis

"STANDING OVATION"

Cyrus Audio's i9-XR amplifier heralds next-gen separates

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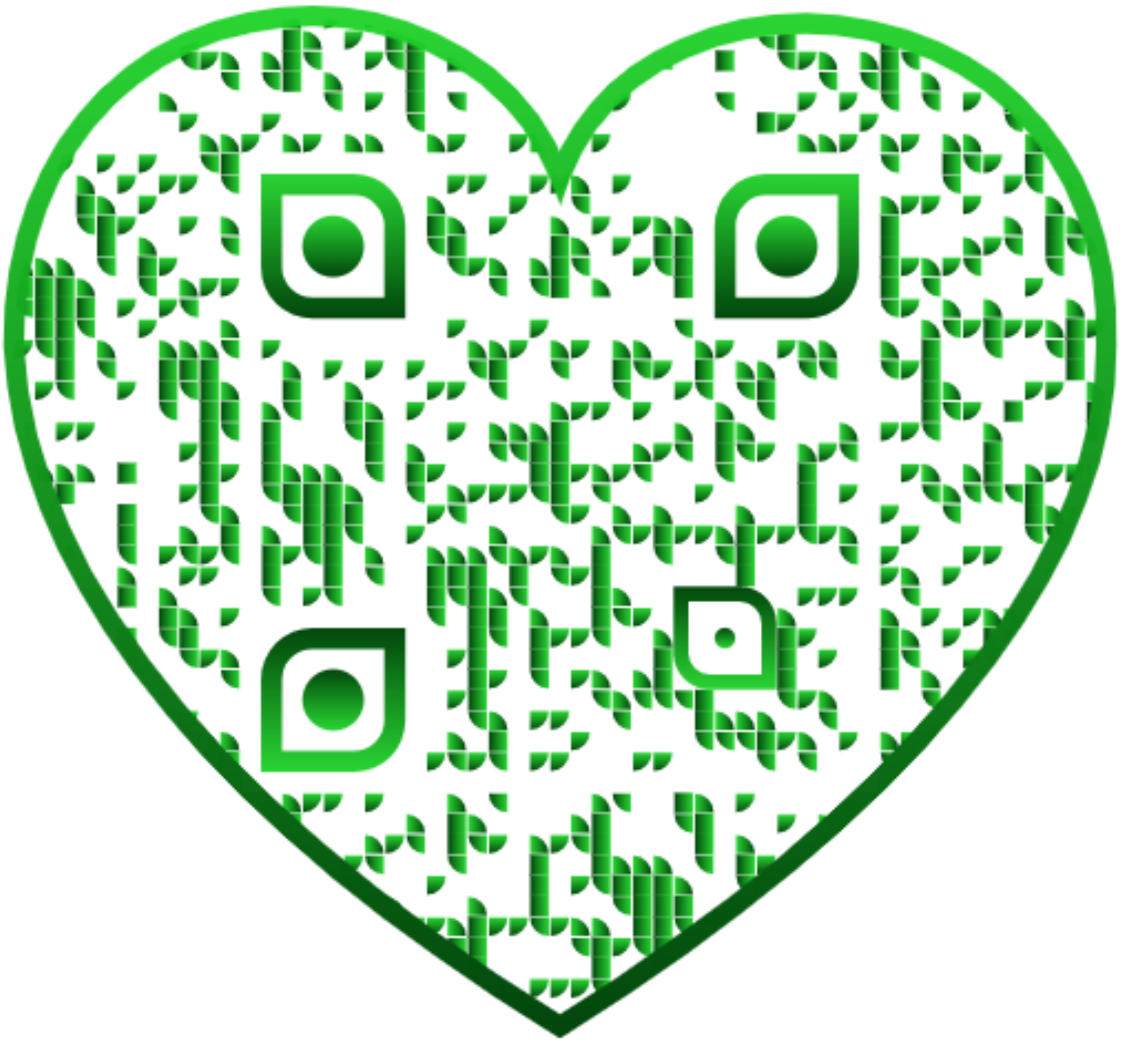

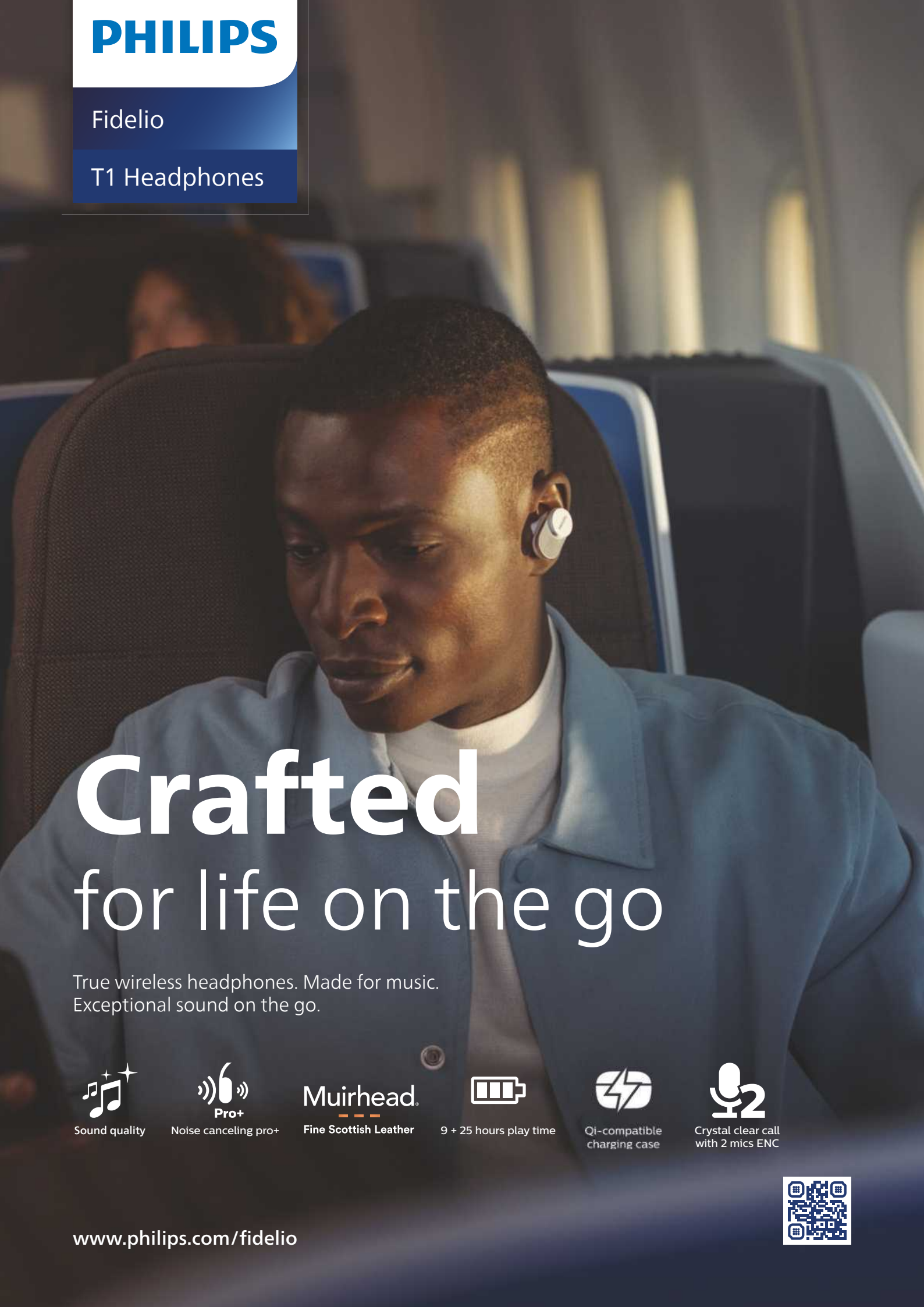
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Welcome

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BADGES EXPLAINED

OUR AWARDS

EDITOR'S CHOICE: Awarded to those products that are judged to deliver outstanding performance

RECOMMENDED: Products that we feel meet a high standard of performance

GROUP TEST WINNER: Comparative tests can only have one winner, and this badge says it all!

Picture credit: Kiss Diouara

I was scanning the stunning lineup for the UK Hi-Fi Show Live at Ascot Racecourse on 10 and 11 September when it occurred to me I don't know what you call a gathering of audiophiles. Y'know, like there's a murder of crows, a school of whales and a deceit of MPs. I made up that last one, but you get the picture.

So, I did a bit of online scrolling in search of our collective noun and discovered... there isn't one. Which, of course, is totally unacceptable. If clowns can have one (a shudder) and aardvarks (an armoury), barbers (a babble) and ghosts (a fright), we hi-fi nuts must surely warrant our own. And that's where you come in. If you fancy inventing us our very own collective noun (a ???? of audiophiles), send it in within the next eight weeks to the address below or email: letters@hifichoice.co.uk, and the one we're most taken with will win a pair of complementary tickets to the aforementioned Ascot shindig.

In the meantime, inside this issue you'll find the history of LP covers, a bumper 16-page *Audiofile* section featuring tons of new product releases and a *stupendous* (faux collective noun alert!) of affordable standmount speakers in our *Group Test*.

Remember to keep an eye on hifishowlive.com for updates on September's UK Hi-Fi Show Live event and for more details and ticket info next month.

Steve Sutherland Editor

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Hi-Fi Choice

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Astell&Kern
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Never miss an issue – turn to p72 for our latest subs offer

Picture credit: Christian Bertrand/Shutterstock.com (Pete Doherty)

Audiofile

THE LATEST INDUSTRY NEWS...

Cutting edge

Two bursts of energy from Maidstone, Kent

PRICE: £7,500-£30,000 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** KEF.COM

KEF HAS ANNOUNCED the latest updates to its infamous Blade and Reference speaker ranges. According to the company: "Blade is an attitude. The Reference is iconic. It's about exploring the art of the possible, which is why the latest version of Blade and The Reference benefits from KEF's latest acoustic innovations: Metamaterial Absorption Technology (MATTM), a bespoke 12th-generation Uni-Q driver array and a host of other improvements. MAT is a truly revolutionary tool in the KEF acoustic armoury because each of the intricate channels efficiently absorbs 99 percent of unwanted sound. This eliminates the resulting distortion and provides a purer, more natural acoustic performance."

Furthermore, KEF says its Uni-Q bespoke driver can deliver: "consistently sweet, lucid and lyrical treble, irrespective of the volume. A new ultra-low distortion midrange motor design lowers the total harmonic distortion (THD) in the midrange and reduces thermal compression, improving efficiency."

Blade's four low-frequency drivers are integrated with the Uni-Q and

MAT with the aim of delivering: "clean, massively extended, immaculately controlled bass". In line with the purity of the original Blade concept, decoupling the voice coil from the diaphragm allows low order crossovers to be used, for purer, silkier bass response.

Blade's four robust, low-frequency drivers are perfectly integrated with the Uni-Q and MAT to deliver clean, massively extended, immaculately controlled bass. In line with the purity of the original Blade concept, decoupling the voice coil from the diaphragm allows low order crossovers to be used, for purer, silkier bass response. These are mounted back to back to avoid exciting the cabinet when playing loud to cancel out kinetic forces that might colour the output. Each pair occupies a separate chamber to reduce the need for damping.

The crossover design has been enhanced in the latest Blade to fine tune the signal path for maximum clarity. Plus, two pairs of audiophile-quality WBT connectors allow bi-wiring or bi-amping for lossless transmission. There are two versions of Blade on offer: the flagship Blade One Meta at £30,000 and the Blade Two Meta at £22, 500. The former three-way floorstander Uni-Q driver array combines a 25mm aluminium tweeter, with a 125mm midrange aluminium cone sat above four 225mm low-frequency aluminium cones to provide a claimed sensitivity of 88dB at 4ohm. The slightly smaller Blade Two Meta, meanwhile, reduces the size of the bass drivers to 165mm for a 86dB sensitivity.

Both Blades come in a choice of eight finishes achieved by blending five cabinet finishes with six driver cone colours: Piano Black/Copper, Piano Black/Grey, Frosted Blue/Blue, Frosted Blue/Bronze, Charcoal Grey/Red, Charcoal Grey/Bronze, Racing Red and Grey Arctic White/Champagne. Customised finishes will be available upon request from June.

Meanwhile The Reference series encompasses two three-way floorstanding speakers, a three-way standmount and two centre speakers for home cinema use. The contours of the dome within The Reference's midrange horn and surround are all computer-optimised in a bid to ensure a smooth transition to the cabinet. KEF's patented tangerine waveguide technology manages the airflow to recreate a natural sound field, dispersing the high-frequency imaging throughout the room. The Reference's bass driver features a vented magnet assembly, a large aluminium voice coil and a light and stiff alloy cone.

The flagship Reference 5 Meta floorstander costs £17,500 and boasts a Uni-Q driver array combining a 25mm aluminium tweeter with a 125mm midrange aluminium cone. This is positioned above four 165mm low-frequency aluminium cones to provide a claimed sensitivity of 88dB at 4ohm. The Reference 3 Meta floorstander is £11,500 and offers the same basic spec as the flagship but with just two bass drivers. The Reference 1 Meta standmount features the same Uni-Q array partnered with a single 165mm bass driver and claims 85dB sensitivity (at 4ohm) for £7,500.

There are five finishes available achieved by blending three cabinet finishes with five driver cone colours: Satin Walnut/Silver, High-Gloss White/Blue, High-Gloss White Champagne, High-Gloss Black/Grey and High-Gloss Black/Copper. ►

Ton up!

Debut buds from A&K

PRICE: £250 **AVAILABLE:** NOW
WEB: ASTELLKERN.CO.UK

ASTELL&KERN IS TAKING its first step into the true-wireless earbud world with its new AK UW100. Equipped with a dedicated 32-bit DAC, it supports Bluetooth 5.2 and aptX Adaptive, as well as having Knowles Balanced Armature drivers.

With its ergonomic and lightweight earbud design, the AK UW100 offers passive noise isolation (PNI) to minimise any unwanted ambient noise in the mid and high range. However, should the user wish to hear outside sounds, a tap of the left earbud will activate ambient mode, with the ability to switch between four ambient levels using the touch controls or via the app.

The AK UW100 sports responsive touch controls for commands such as play, pause, skip track, volume adjustment, activating Ambient mode, answering calls and enabling voice assistant from a compatible device. A proprietary iOS and Android app also allows users to customise touch controls, ambient levels and various EQ settings.

The earbuds claim up to six hours of battery life from a single charge and a further 18 hours top up via the charging case, which also features fast charging – where a 10-minute blast will provide an hour of playback.

Alongside the charging case, the AK UW100 comes supplied with a choice of five different-sized silicone ear tips (XS, S, M, L, XL) and a USB-C charging cable.

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Get the balance right

A trio of new products from Pro-Ject benefitting from True Balanced Connection

PRICE: £350-£2,100 **AVAILABLE:** VARIED **WEB:** PROJECT-AUDIO.COM/EN/HENLEYAUDIO.CO.UK

PRO-JECT HAS LAUNCHED three new products: the X8 turntable, matching Phono Box S3 B and Phono Box DS3 B phono stages. These benefit from what the company is describing as True Balanced Connection, stating: "An interconnect cable between a record player and a phono stage is prone to pick up noise on the way. That noise and interference can stem from a lot of unavoidable sources, such as household appliances, wi-fi and Bluetooth devices, other power cables and audio amplifiers. Unshielded (ie RCA) interconnects can amplify the picked-up noise and make it audible through your speakers, interfering with the pure musical signal.

"Balanced (typically XLR) cable connections double the wires carrying the musical signal – with one side inverted. In this case noise still gets picked up by both wires, but with one side reversed. When the signals are re-joined at the phono stage, the picked-up noise is cancelled out by the opposing signals. The benefit of this is a louder, cleaner musical signal that has doubled in size with almost no remaining noise."

The X8 turntable is mass-loaded with a heavyweight wooden plinth, precision-lathed, TPE-damped aluminium main platter and 9in Evolution tonearm finished with an Ortofon Quintet Blue (*HFC* 389) moving-coil cartridge. It boasts a thick, heavy MDF chassis while the main platter is precision cut from a single

piece of aluminium and lined with a ring of TPE rubber damping to produce a heavy non-resonant base that is claimed to contribute to highly accurate speed stability with very little fluctuation. The platter is mounted on an inverted ceramic-tipped main bearing, bolstered with magnetic support for fluid rotation without resistance. It is driven by a perimeter drive belt, connected to a low-noise AC motor. The motor is in turn controlled by an AC generator with adjustable speed control for switching between 33 and 45rpm.

The 9CC Evolution carbon fibre tonearm features a one-piece, tapered carbon fibre tonearm tube, mounted in a heavyweight bearing block with high-quality ABEC 7 ball bearings. It is also VTA and azimuth adjustable for cartridge mounting.

The X8 is supplied with height-adjustable TPE-damped feet, a removable dust cover, felt mat and a semi-balanced Connect-IT E 5P > RCA phono cable for easy setup out of the box. It comes in high-gloss black, high-gloss white or real-wood walnut veneer finishes and is priced at £2,100.

The Phono Box DS3 B is a dual-mono, fully discrete moving-magnet and moving-coil phono stage with balanced inputs and outputs. The company says it took the decision to employ discrete circuitry in the Phono Box DS3 B because: "Discrete circuits involve no operational amplifiers (op-amps), and the result is a more neutral, natural, dynamic and vivid sound. They are more complicated to put together and involve a greater variety of components, but the result when utilised in a well-organised electrical layout is a true high-end sound."

Stage craft

The phono stage can be connected to two turntables at the same time and each input is able to save its previous settings in its memory so that the impedance, capacitance (for moving-magnet carts) and gain will all be set as you switch between turntables. For moving-coil carts, the continuously adjustable load-impedance dial on the front panel allows you to set the impedance to suit the cartridge.

The £350 Phono Box DS3 B is finished in a steel chassis, covered by silver or black aluminium panels, for rigidity and isolation. The minimalist aesthetic can be enhanced by the addition of retro-inspired, magnetically installed wooden side panels (available separately). It also features an external power adapter, to protect the sensitive internal signals from any interference.

The Phono Box S3 B is a compact moving-magnet and coil phono stage with dual-mono layout, discrete circuitry and balanced inputs and outputs and the company says it's extensively customisable to suit the moving-magnet or coil cartridge it's connected to, boasting five impedance, four capacitance and four gain options. It comes finished in a steel chassis, covered by silver or black aluminium panels, and is priced at £530. Pro-Ject adds: "The neat minimalist aesthetic allows for good spacing between controls on the front panel and connections on the back panel, despite its smaller size. It additionally features an external power adapter, to keep the sensitive internal signals free from any interference."

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Mission accomplished

Classic resurrection from UK company

PRICE: £3,500 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** MISSION.CO.UK

MISSION HAS CREATED a new version of its famous 770 two-way standmount loudspeaker. Resurrected 44 years on from its debut, the company says it's been: "re-engineered to reap the benefits of modern techniques and technologies while invoking the spirit of the original in terms of technical ethos, look and sound". The intention behind the original was to deliver the BBC-influenced midrange accuracy and transparency of a speaker like the Spendor BC1, while also achieving tighter bass and a more propulsive and engaging sound.

The popularity of Wharfedale's recent Linton and Denton revivals of iconic British speakers from the Sixties and Seventies encouraged Mission that there is a demand for the reappearance of classic, much-loved British designs in re-engineered forms.

The company admits that: "Nostalgia is a part of what fuels this demand, but it is also a recognition that these designs have stood the test of time, exuding authenticity and engineering gravitas often lacking in the age of smart speakers and digital streaming".

The new Mission 770 retains two key elements from the original: its polypropylene cone – claimed to be unique in a consumer product at the time – and the resonance control of the cabinet. A new 20cm polypropylene mid/bass driver has been developed for the re-engineered model, mimicking the extended response and low coloration of the original, while upgrading the motor system to take account of modern power handling and dynamic requirements. Like the original, the driver is built onto a die-cast chassis with large rear 'windows' to reduce early reflections back through the cone. The company says that special care has been taken to marry a low-density nitrile surround to the cone, to match its impedance and reduce reflections from the cone edge.

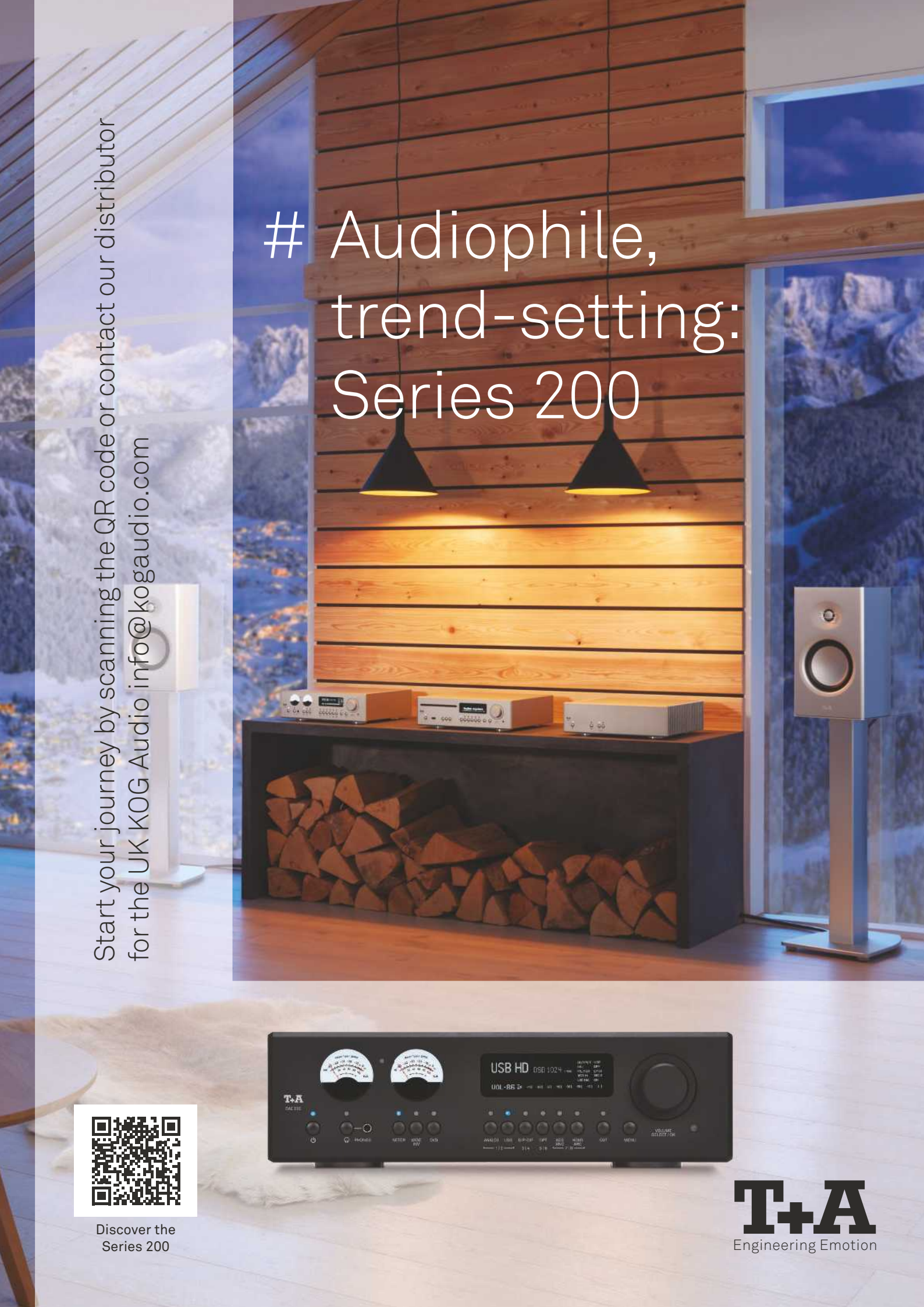
Fully loaded

The new polypropylene cone is loaded with minerals to make it stiffer than the original, with a view to yielding fast, tight bass. This is balanced by tuning the cabinet and reflex port to a very low frequency, avoiding the 'one-note bass' that Mission claims is typical of a lot of bass reflex systems. In addition, the port is flared at both inlet and outlet to smooth airflow and eradicate distortion. Bass extends to below 30Hz and the treble unit uses a lightweight, damped microfibre 28mm dome backed by a damped rear chamber claimed to push the fundamental resonance well below the crossover region.

The original 770 used a single coil to equalise the bass-to-midrange response as well as crossover to the treble unit, the latter driven by a resistor, capacitor and coil combination. Today's advanced software crossover mapping and measuring techniques have allowed Mission to claim it has: "perfected the balance between bass and midrange and adjusted the crossover to the treble unit by mapping the acoustic crossover slopes with extreme accuracy".

The drivers and crossover are housed in a real-wood veneered cabinet, measuring 300 x 590 x 300mm (WxHxD), with a white laminated front baffle echoing the style of the original. Beneath the veneers lies a twin-wall sandwich of high-density MDF and particle board bonded by a layer of high-damping adhesive. There's internal bracing to add strength to the front baffle and to brace the drive unit to the cabinet, complemented by a layer of acoustic foam and damping fibre, strategically placed to absorb reflections inside the cabinet without overdamping the bass quality. Sensitivity is quoted at 88dB with a nominal impedance of 8ohm.

The new 770 weighs in at 19.2kg per speaker, is being manufactured in limited quantities in a choice of walnut or black wood veneers and the price includes a pair of dedicated floor stands with a damped carbon steel frame and large stainless steel spikes to protect from unwanted vibrations. The package is completed by a set of stainless steel spike seats for hard floors and a pair of gloves for handling. ▶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Bar-room blitz

New soundbar system for music and movies

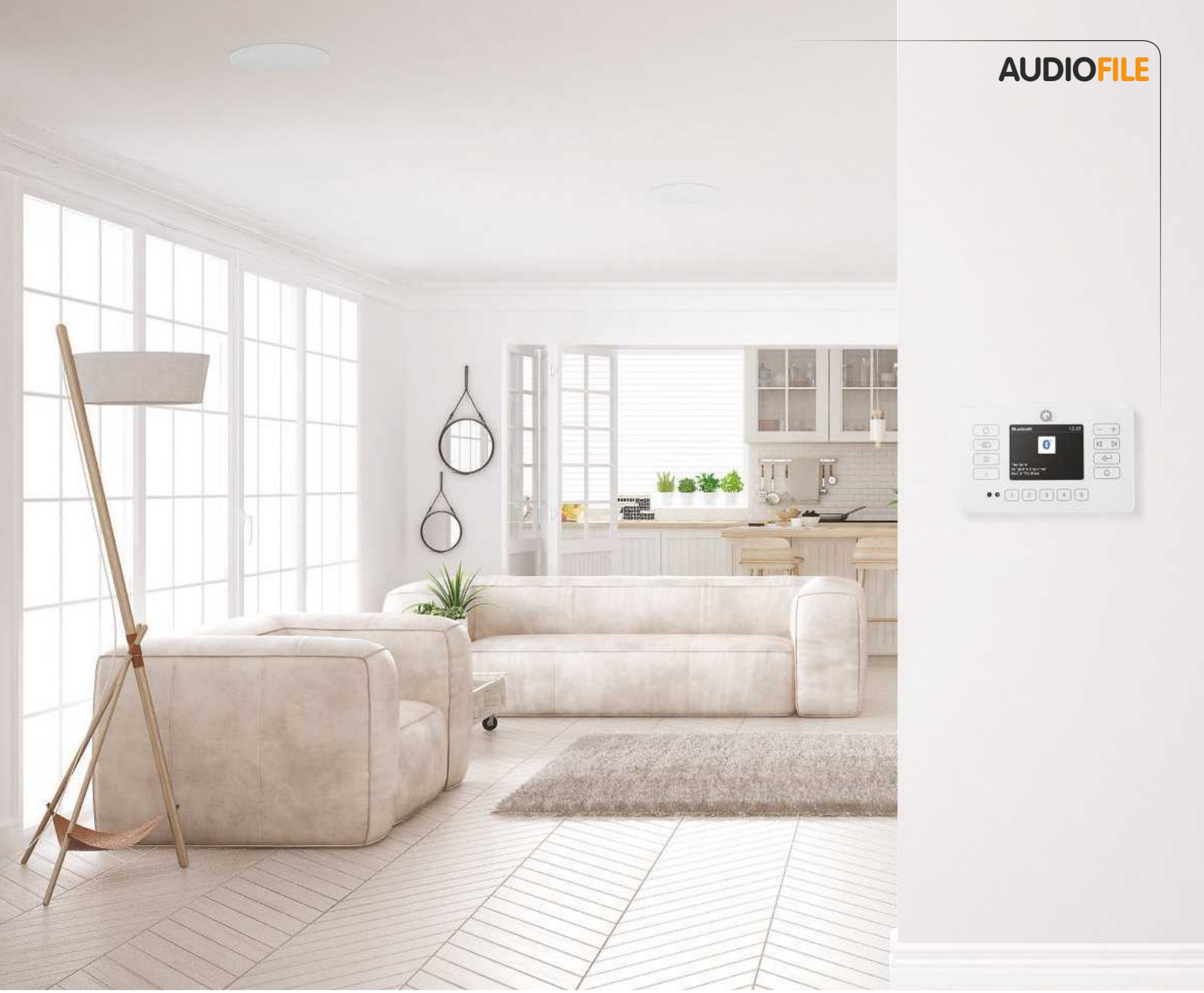
PRICE: £429 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** POLKAUDIO.COM/ SOUNDUNITED.COM

POLK AUDIO HAS introduced a new soundbar system, the MagniFi Mini AX, that comes with immersive audio playback via Dolby Atmos and DTS:X built-in, optimised through Polk's patented SDA technology. The MagniFi Mini AX soundbar boasts a sleek 37cm-wide design and is equipped with an advanced five-speaker array and a wireless down-firing subwoofer, which means – or so the company claims – it: "provides deep bass, detailed highs and an expansive 3D soundstage rivalling much larger soundbars".

The MagniFi Mini AX has been designed to "immersify" stereo music via a 3D Audio Mode, which upmixes the audio to 360° virtual surround sound, including virtual height channels. It will stream music from your phone, tablet or computer over wi-fi and Bluetooth with Apple AirPlay 2, Google Chromecast and Spotify Connect also included.

Movie and Music Modes tailor the soundbar's performance to your content, and if you're using it to watch your TV into the early hours, Night Mode simultaneously increases the dialogue while decreasing the bass.

The MagniFi Mini AX soundbar system has been designed with easy setup in mind. Its one-cable connection is compatible with any TV via HDMI eARC/ ARC (HDMI cable included), optical, or AUX-in. An OLED display shows settings and disappears when not in use. It comes with a remote handset, works with most TV remotes out of the box and is Roku TV Ready for even easier setup and operation.



Wall of sound

Discrete wireless audio system from Q Acoustics

PRICE: £500-£700 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** QACOUSTICS.CO.UK

Q ACOUSTICS IS introducing the E120, an installed, wall-mounted wireless audio system designed to function in any room in a home or garden office, pairing the company's range of discreet in-ceiling or in-wall speakers for what QA is calling: "a zero clutter, wireless home audio system".

The key features of the E120 are a built-in Class D stereo amplifier serving up 2x 25W of power, an IP54-rating which makes it suitable for kitchens and bathrooms, Bluetooth 5.0 for wireless streaming of music from compatible devices and built-in DAB+ and FM radio with one-touch presets. Its touch-sensitive splash-proof 3.2in colour display shows track, artist and album name and has an internal light sensor, which can be configured to automatically set the display brightness.

To blend into any interior, the main wall panel comes in black or white and owners can connect to any pair of passive speakers, including cabinet designs between 6 and 8ohm. The speaker outputs can be configured as stereo or dual mono (both output left and right combined) by setting a small switch, while a pair can be wired in series on each output to support even distribution of sound in larger rooms.

For those that wish to install an entire Q Acoustics system, the pricings are as follows: E120 and a stereo pair of Qi65CB in-ceiling speakers for most indoor applications £500. E120 and a stereo pair of Qi65C Professional in-ceiling speakers for most indoor applications £570. E120 and a stereo pair of Qi65CW weatherproof 6.5in in-ceiling speakers for showers, bathrooms and verandas £650. E120 and a stereo pair of Qi65RP Performance 6.5in in-wall speakers for a discrete hi-fi: £700. E120 and a stereo pair of Qi65EW weatherproof on-wall speakers for use in gardens and verandas (wall mount the E120 by the exit to the garden or veranda) £700. Two 7m QED speaker cables and 5m power cables come supplied as part of the package as standard.

Special branch

True wireless earbuds get an upgrade

PRICE: £160 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** SENNHEISER.COM

SENNHEISER HAS RELEASED its new Special Design Edition of its CX Plus true-wireless earbuds, which feature a brushed matte surface and Active Noise Cancellation.

The earbuds boast a German-engineered TrueResponse transducer, which the company describes as: "an acoustic system that brings audiophile technology to everyday listening". Meanwhile, customisable touch controls allow users to tailor bespoke commands to operate audio, calls and access voice assistants, and each earbud is equipped with a pair of dual mics that optimise speech for calls and voice assistant. The independent earbud use allows the right and left buds to be used on their own or as a pair.

With IPX4-rated splash resistance, the CX Plus SE True Wireless boasts a battery and portable charging case that provide 24 hours of playback time.

Power play

New DC power supply from Clearaudio

PRICE: £740 **AVAILABLE:** NOW
WEB: SOUNDFOWNDATIONS.CO.UK

Clearaudio has launched the Professional Power 24V, a standalone DC power supply designed to elevate the performance of turntables from the brand's Innovation Series. In addition, it also supports the Clearaudio Ovation turntable and is positioned in the range between the standard SMPS unit with which all these models were initially launched and the premium battery-powered Smart Power 24V – which costs a more hefty £2,630.

The company says the Professional Power 24V is: "a high-quality linear PSU, based around a toroidal transformer, large electrolytic capacitors and all-discrete MOSFET voltage stabilisation to provide the essential steady 24 volt DC supply. The unit's construction features professional-grade electronic components and a carefully mounted transformer within the compact cylindrical case, compliantly suspended to reduce mechanical noise output and inward microphonic effects."

Clearaudio also claims that, due to an optimised circuit layout, including final passive filtering arranged after the physically oversized protection fuse: "the dynamic output impedance of the unit is kept very low for the best possible coupling to the turntable's DC motor. The result is a much cleaner power supply that unleashes a subjectively more dynamic sound with further enhanced resolution."

It weighs in at 1.1kg, measures 92 x 94 x 145mm (WxHxD), comes in a choice of black or silver finishes and existing owners of Clear Audio's Ovation or Innovation turntables can add the Professional Power 24V as a drop-in upgrade.

Rated 'R'

R Series comes to the UK

PRICE: £1,600-£8,100 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** PERLISTENAUDIO.COM/KARMA-AV.CO.UK

PERLISTEN AUDIO'S R Series has just been added to its loudspeaker lineup. Complementing the company's flagship Signature S Series, the Rs come at more accessible prices and feature the Perlisten DPC configuration of three 26mm silk domes. Top of the range is the £8,100 R7t four-way tower, with the three previously mentioned silk domes partnered by four 165mm bass drivers. Sensitivity is quoted at 90dB into 4ohm loads.

Also in the 'R' series are the three-way R5t tower (with two 165mm bass drivers and 89dB sensitivity), a matching R5c centre for home cinemas, the standmount R5m (again two 165mm bass drivers and quoted 89dB sensitivity), a three-way R4s (with a single 165mm bass driver and 86.5dB sensitivity claimed) and the £1,600 bookshelf R4b with just the one 165mm bass driver and sensitivity quoted at 84.6dB.

The bass drivers are made from the company's proprietary HPF (Hybrid Pulp Formulation) cone material – a new cone formulation comprised of mixed long fibre hardwood, bamboo and wool. Its strength, mass and damping have been used in a bid to ensure detailed, full-range response without colouration. The drivers can be aligned as either bass reflex or acoustic suspension, depending upon the listener's tastes or application.

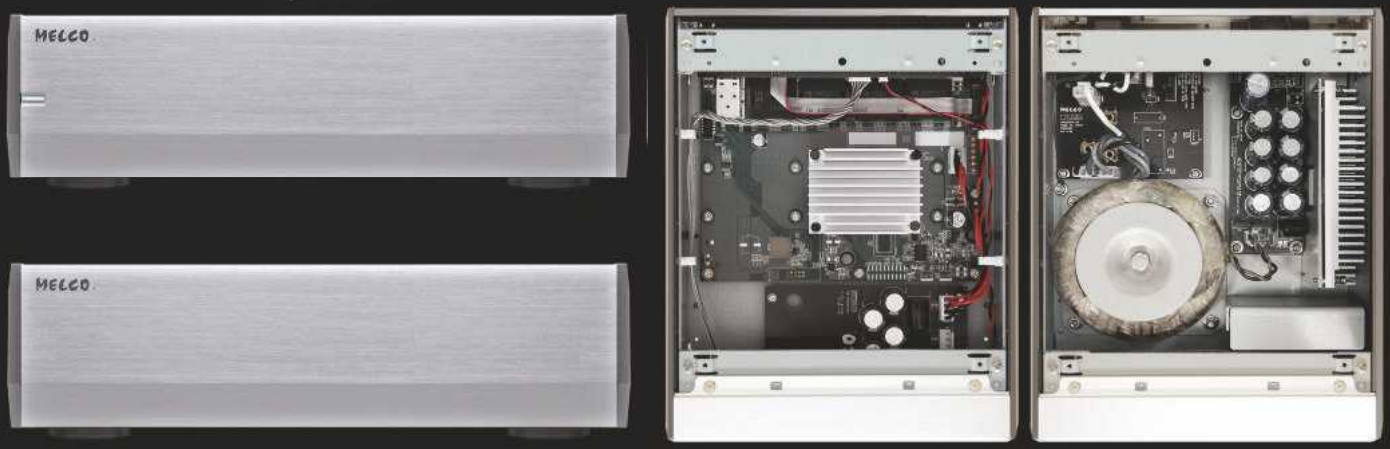
R Series designs are available in a piano black finish, with piano white available soon. ▶

Many happy returns

Naim and Focal come together to offer a complete system

PRICE: £28,000 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** NAIMAUDIO.COM/FOCAL.COM

TO MARK A decade since the merger of their companies, Focal and Naim have released a 10th Anniversary Edition complete hi-fi system. The ready-to-play-out-of-the-box setup includes Focal's Sopra N°2 three-way bass reflex floorstanding loudspeakers in a special finish featuring concrete side panels paired with a 'tin' front baffle. Then there's Naim's NDX 2 music-streaming player, which pairs with the NAC 282/NAP 250 DR pre-power amplifiers. All come in their own unique finishes complete with matching NAPSC and HiCap DR power supplies. The system also includes all the necessary interconnects, including a pair of Naim's top-range Super Lumina speaker cables. The only setback is it'll cost you 28 grand. Time to start saving...



Switched on

High-end network switch launches from Japan

PRICE: £5,000 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** MELCO-AUDIO.COM

DIGITAL MUSIC LIBRARY specialist Melco has launched a high-end network switch, which for the first time, benefits from a separate high-performance linear power supply. The S10 comes in silver or black and comprises separate head and power units, keeping the sensitive data-carrying areas of the design from the power supply. The two-box approach echoes that of the flagship digital music library, the N10/2 (tested last issue) and, the company claims: "offers the least compromise when it comes to ultimate sound quality".

The S10's head unit is based on a heavily upgraded S100 network switch and benefits from an improved power management section. The head unit's casework has also been improved with better aluminium employed for the casework to enhance rigidity and to increase isolation for the signal-carrying electronics. A rigid steel screened chassis offers further mechanical stability.

Rear panel connections include different speed RJ45 Ethernet ports: 4x 100MB and 4x 1GB, the latter of which are useful for the Roon Core processor, which generates high traffic flow. In addition, two 1GB SFP (Small Form Factor) ports are also on hand for direct fibre connections and compatibility with supported devices.

A large toroidal transformer forms the bulk of the S10's power unit and is mounted on a solid base with specialist insulators from Japan's TAOC. Further features include high-quality Neutrik connectors on the output, plus a high-precision '102 SSC' conductor from Tokyo's Oyaide for the connecting DC cable.

►

C-ing is believing

Two new amps from Japan

PRICE: £2,350-£2,850 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** ROTEL.COM

ROTEL HAS LAUNCHED a pair of custom installation amplifiers – the C8 and C8+. The new Class AB integrateds deliver eight channels of multi-zone audio and are powered by an oversized, in-house manufactured toroidal transformer feeding an array of high-current dedicated output devices, which the company claims will: "comfortably drive even the most demanding loudspeakers".

The C8 Custom Installation Amplifier delivers 70W of power per channel into 4ohm loads and the C8+ claims 150W (also into 4ohm). Zone outputs are bridged delivering 140W and 300W respectively into 4ohm and an auto-sensing, auto-switching PA Override feature is designed to ensure installation flexibility. Both units feature four analogue source inputs available to all zone outputs through internal matrix switching, further customisable with independent volume, balance, bass and treble settings. The C8+ also includes two optical and two coaxial digital inputs supporting up to 24-bit/192kHz resolution.

The front panel of each amplifier has a graphic display with controls including selection of the active matrixed input source and volume control of each zone in real time. The custom-engineered 2U height chassis does not require top or bottom clearance spacing for rack mounting with the included rack ears. Speaker outputs utilise detachable Phoenix connectors for pre-wire installation with secure screw-locking mechanisms. Ethernet, RS232 and 12V trigger connections provide integration with popular control systems, allowing for customisation to incorporate the units into: "virtually any system".

The C8 costs £2,300 and the C8+ £2,850 and both are available in a black finish.

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twenty5.26*i* - Dec 20

DJ heaven

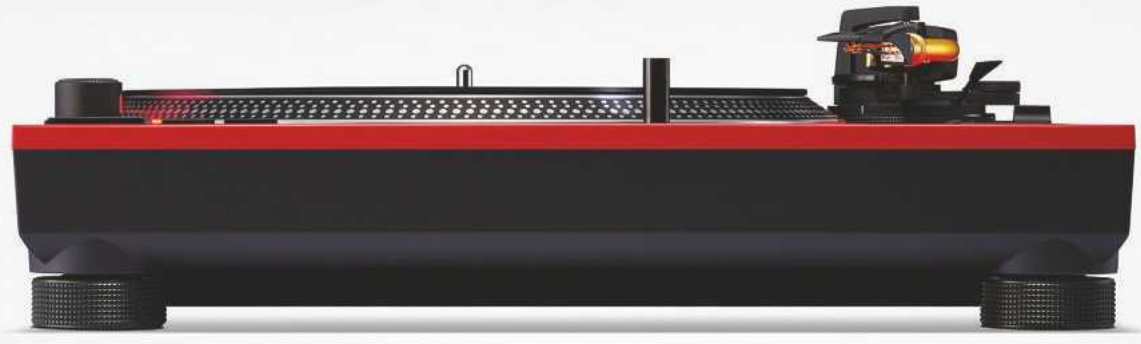
Limited-edition anniversary turntable from Technics

PRICE: £900 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** TECHNICS.COM

TECHNICS IS LAUNCHING a limited-edition 50th anniversary version of its iconic SL-1200 DJ turntable, the SL-1200M7L. The Technics 1200 Series was launched as a popular direct-drive turntable back in 1972, becoming a best seller and this new model is based on the SL-1200MK7, released in 2019. It comes in seven limited-edition colours (black, red, blue, white, green, yellow or beige), which the company somewhat mysteriously claims have been selected: "to reflect the street culture that gave birth to DJing".

The SL-1200M7L features a tonearm anodised in "a golden hue", engraved serial numbers on each individual piece and a gold-coloured slipmat with Technics logo. Further features include a high-rigidity cabinet and high-damping insulation intended to shut out all vibrations, a starting torque/brake speed adjustment function, pitch-control designed to enable accurate and stable pitch adjustment, a reverse-play function to suit DJ playing styles and a stylus illuminator featuring a high-brightness and long-life LED.

To celebrate the release, Technics streamed an event in collaboration with Boiler Room and Dommune, featuring DJs from around the world including DJ Kraze, DJ Koco, Ellen Allien, Gilles Peterson, Mala, Marcel Dettmann and Shanti Celeste. You can check out the action at: boilerroom.tv.



Magnificent seven

Updated range of speakers from Klipsch

PRICE: £275-£1,500 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** KLIPSCH.COM

KLIPSCH HAS REVEALED details of its new 10-model Reference series of Dolby Atmos speakers featuring what the company claims are: "the most dramatic upgrades since the series' inception, including many technologies derived from the award-winning Klipsch Reference Premiere series".

Now in its seventh generation, the updated Klipsch Reference series features a new, larger, edge-to-edge proprietary Tractrix horn intended to provide improved coverage, bandwidth and directivity control. Improved drivers made of spun-copper thermoformed crystal polymer (TCP) use steeper angling of cones in a bid to achieve a smoother response and better crossover integration for superior accuracy and transparency.

The cabinets feature enhanced bracing with a black scratch-resistant wood grain vinyl finish, metallic-coated binding posts and Dolby Atmos connections allowing for elevation speaker integration.

The 10 new Klipsch Reference series models consist of three floorstanding speakers (R-605FA with integrated Dolby Atmos-enabled speaker at £1,500, R-800F at £1,250 and the R-600F at £950), two bookshelf speakers, two centre channels, a Dolby Atmos elevation speaker that can also be used as a surround speaker and two powered subwoofers.

The £1,500 R-605FA features a high performance up-firing Dolby Atmos speaker integrated in the top for an enveloping soundstage. It has a 25mm aluminium tweeter with Kapton Suspension, two 165mm TCP bass drivers and Klipsch's all new 90° x 90° Tractrix horn with directivity control over a larger bandwidth of frequencies, resulting in a more accurate soundstage. The R-800F comes in at £1,250 and ditches the upward-firing Dolby Atmos element (although it has connections so one can be added at a later date). It has the same Tractrix horn as its sibling, but boasts two larger 203mm TCP bass drivers. The R-600F is £950 and is the same as the R-800F, but with 165mm bass drivers. The standmounts come in the shape of the R-50M at £325 and the R-40M at £275. The former has the same Tractrix horn as the floorstanders paired with a single 133mm bass driver, while the later has a smaller 102mm bass driver.

Tip (less) for the top

No rubber bungs for new earbuds from Gothernburg

PRICE: £80 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** JAYSHEADPHONES.COM

SWEDISH COMPANY JAYS, part of Northbaze Distribution AB, is launching its t-Six True Wireless – the brand's first tip-less earbuds. The company explains: "We understand that wearing earbuds must be comfortable to use for longer periods. The t-Six is designed with a tip-less design meaning no ear rubber tips are needed to offer you a comfortable experience throughout the day."

Adding to the ergonomic design, the t-Six comes with a pocket-sized charging case with intuitive touch controls embedded on both earpieces to enable managing calls and playback. The buds' environmental noise cancelling is designed to eliminate unwanted background interference while speaking on the phone, and they're also equipped with dual microphones and offer up to six hours of battery in a single charge. The case charges via USB-C, a full charge taking an hour and a half.

Over and out

PRICE: £7,000 **AVAILABLE:** NOW
WEB: ECLIPSE-TD.COM/UK DECENTAUDIO.CO.UK

Here's a heads-up that this will be your last chance to acquire Japanese company Eclipse's flagship loudspeaker, the TD712zMK2, which is being retired sooner than expected due to delays in introducing its replacement caused by COVID-19-related slowdowns and schedule disruptions.

The factory in Kobe is currently working on a updated flagship that incorporates new ideas into its design, building on the TD712zMK2's accurate waveform reproduction approach to speaker design. Originally launched 18 years ago in 2004, as the largest model in the range, the TD712z benefitted from a 12cm full-range drive unit for midband accuracy, a heavily engineered dedicated stand, plus many mysterious features inside its iconic ovoid outer shell.

The MK2 version came later, in 2009 – its remit to extend the frontiers of performance achieved with the original, with a wider frequency response, improved off-axis response and better power handling. Eclipse undertook a review of all elements and functions to produce a single-driver speaker with a quoted 35Hz-26kHz frequency response. Aimed at both music and movie lovers, the TD712zMK2 was available in regular and short stand variants, the latter for use as a centre channel.

While engineers are working on the new flagship, the company says its TD510zMK2 will be considered its interim flagship. There is still very limited stock of the TD712zMK2 available on a first-come first-served basis.

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Stereophile, December 2021

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Hi Fi News, April 2022

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DETAILS

PRODUCT
Ferrum ERCO

ORIGIN
Poland

TYPE
USB DAC/ headphone preamplifier

WEIGHT
1.8kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
217 x 50 x 206mm

FEATURES
- Digital inputs: USB-C; coaxial; optical
- Supports: up to 32-bit/384kHz; DSD256; MQA
- Headphone outputs: balanced 4.4mm; unbalanced 6.35mm jacks

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Signature Audio Systems

WEBSITE
ferrum.audio

Taking up Pole position

This Polish hotshot brand broke onto the audiophile scene with its programmable DC PSU, followed by the OOR headphone amp. Now, with DAC onboard, comes the ERCO

What's in a name? For some manufacturers the chosen monicker for their latest product is little more than a bewildering and largely forgettable series of numbers and letters. Others take their inspiration from music, composers and any other seemingly random word that they think will look cool on their marketing material. And then there's Polish company HEM, selling under its Ferrum brand. The snazzy USB DAC/headphone amplifier before you is spelt ERCO, but pronounced 'ertso'. Apparently it's Esperanto for 'ore', and so follows on from the mineral-based brand identity – Ferrum, OOR – you get the idea. What's also not immediately apparent, given that all Ferrum products are pretty much indistinguishable when it comes to looks, is that this is perhaps the most comprehensively equipped model it has produced to date.

Combining elements of the company's all-analogue OOR headphone amp, it can also be upgraded with the programmable – and thus very flexible – Hypsos power supply. So the ERCO is a complete 'just-add-computer-and-headphones' solution for desktop audio, including a USB input and onboard DAC.

It will also function as an analogue headphone amp, having RCA line-ins, as well as offering variable-level

The sound here is all about control, effortless power and clean refinement

analogue outs – via RCAs and balanced XLRs – for use as a preamp straight into a power amp or pair of active speakers. The analogue inputs are passed straight through to the outputs via an ALPS volume control, minus the ADC/DAC chain you'll find in most DAC/amps with analogue inputs. It comes with a standard 'wall-wart' PSU, which can be replaced by the aforementioned slick Hypsos PSU, turning the ERCO into a £3,500 two-box device for your desktop – or even main system.

Ferrum says of ERCO that: "Desktop high-end just became a thing", to which the only sensible response is: "Nice try, but it's been a thing for some time now". In practice there's no shortage of variations on the DAC/headphone amplifier theme, from very affordable models like Chord's Mojo 2 (*HFC* 487) and various iFi Audio offerings through to the likes of the Naim Uniti Atom Headphone Edition (*HFC* 479) and Matrix Audio X-Sabre 3 (*HFC* 488), those last two also incorporating streaming capability for prices in the same ballpark as the new Ferrum.

Add in the availability of some even more exotic models aimed at the 'head-fi' market, and it's clear desktop high-end is an established 'thingdom'

into which the ERCO pitches itself. Fortunately, this DAC/headphone amp is decidedly well equipped by desktop standards. The 'computer audio' input is on a USB-C port – for which a USB-A-to-C cable is supplied in the box. Via that input the digital section can accept an admirably wide range of formats, with PCM up to 32-bit/384kHz and up to DSD256, while there's also MQA decoding/rendering to suit Tidal surfers. Use the coaxial or optical inputs and as usual you'll be limited to 24-bit/96kHz and DSD via DoP. Some may consider this to be a limitation, but for many users 24-bit/96kHz is more than adequate, thank you.

Inputs – digital and analogue – are selected by a simple control on a very easy-to-understand front panel. Aside from a large volume dial, the only other setting is for headphone amplifier gain, to help you match the ERCO to your headgear of choice. A selection of –5.8dB, +6dB and +17.8dB is provided for the balanced (4.4mm Pentaconn) output and –11.8dB, 0dB and +11.8dB for the unbalanced 6.35mm socket. There's also a brightness setting, for the illuminated logo, located on the rear along with two power inputs – standard coaxial for the plug-top PSU, plus a Power Link for use with Ferrum's Hypsos. It's all very ERCO-nomic.

Inside there's the analogue path already mentioned, plus a digital section based around an ESS Sabre ES9028PRO, for which the Ferrum team has drawn on its digital experience to create a custom filter uploaded onto the DAC, rather than giving the user the often mind-boggling choice of filters this converter offers as standard. We've spent way too much time struggling with filter options and coming to no firm conclusion, so we applaud any designer willing to make the choice for us and stick to it.

HOW IT COMPARES

When it comes to sheer grunt, and especially an ability to deliver very high power into very low headphone impedances, Ferrum's ERCO is in the top drawer of today's headphone amps. It beats iFi Audio's Signature version of its Pro iDSD DAC/amp for Watts but, at a similar all-in £3,250 price, the latter not only offers a host of extra features but also boasts an appealingly rich, weighty, controlled and highly informative sound.

Another worthy alternative is the funky Phonitor xe from SPL (£1,900 or £2,500 with DAC768 option). Despite the lack of XLR/RCA line outs and digital features, it carries a host of 'analogue' sound tuning options targeted directly at the high-end headphone buff. Its unashamedly 'pro' specification, tank-like build quality and striking red finish are matched by a sound with presence and power, especially into low-sensitivity/high-impedance headphones.

By way of upgrade the ERCO (lower chassis) may be powered via Ferrum's matching, and fully programmable, £1,100 Hypsos PSU (top chassis)

This filter is part of a suite of digital management strategies here: the team has written its own code, running on an ARM processor, to optimise the performance of all the digital ports (USB, coaxial and optical) and handle the MQA functions – after all, the HEM team was involved with manufacturing Mytek's DACs. Meanwhile, the audio path is fully balanced from the DAC to the modified IC amplification used for the outputs, which is rated at 300mW/300ohm and 1.7W/50ohm at the unbalanced outputs, and 1.2W and 6.1W into the same impedances via the balanced feed.

Sound quality

Simple is as simple does, and the beauty of the ERCO is that it's dead easy to setup and use, whether in desktop or main system applications, and certainly compact enough, at less than 220mm wide, 206mm deep and a mere 50mm tall. It's also beautifully packaged and the quick start guide tells you all you need to know, which is good – given the performance on offer here, you'll want to get into it as soon as possible.

Using the ERCO as a DAC into a selection of preamps and integrateds, and using unity (0dB) gain on a couple of occasions so the Ferrum's volume control is doing all the work, it gives a very good account of itself, with a wide-open, detailed sound possessing plenty of sparkle and heft. Playing a stupidly extended Carl Palmer drum solo from *The Silent Choir* Emerson, Lake and Palmer live set – the version of *Rondo* runs the better part of 20 minutes – the ERCO makes the most of the slightly murky 1971 live sound. Palmer's drums thunder and cymbals sizzle, as they should, while switching to headphones realises a sound that is even gutsier and tightly paced, especially when running in balanced mode.

Without any messing or manipulation, this amplifier just lets the music breathe

The sound here is all about control, effortless power and clean refinement. Well, unless the music is a bit on the grubby side and needs some grit served up with all that hi-fi stuff – in which case that's just what the ERCO delivers. However, play it sweet and ▶

CONNECTIONS

1. Balanced XLR outs
2. Single-ended unbalanced RCA out
3. Single-ended unbalanced RCA in
4. Optical digital input (192kHz)
5. Coaxial digital input (96kHz)
6. USB-C input (384kHz/DSD256)

HI-FI STARTS WITH EMIT

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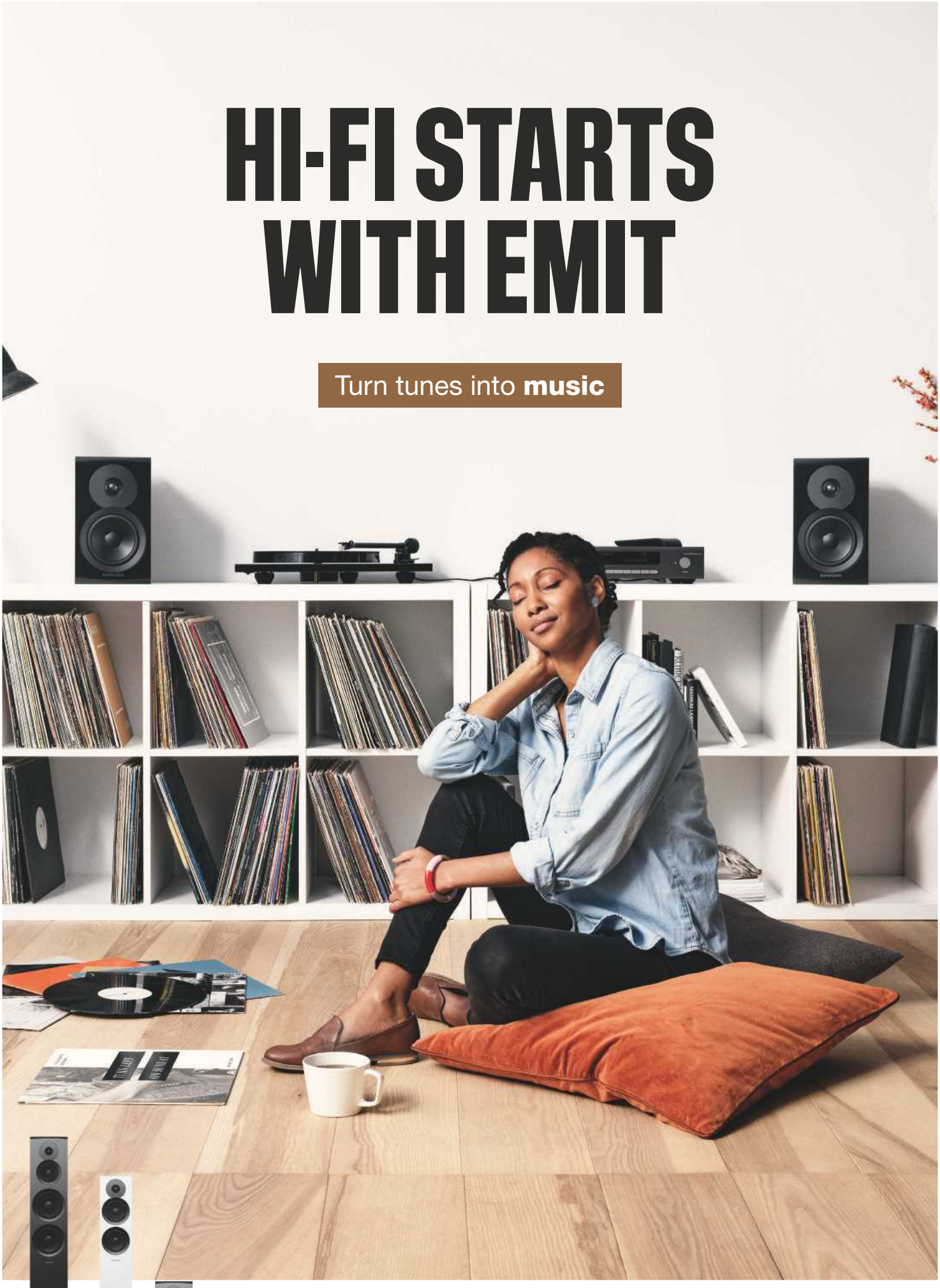

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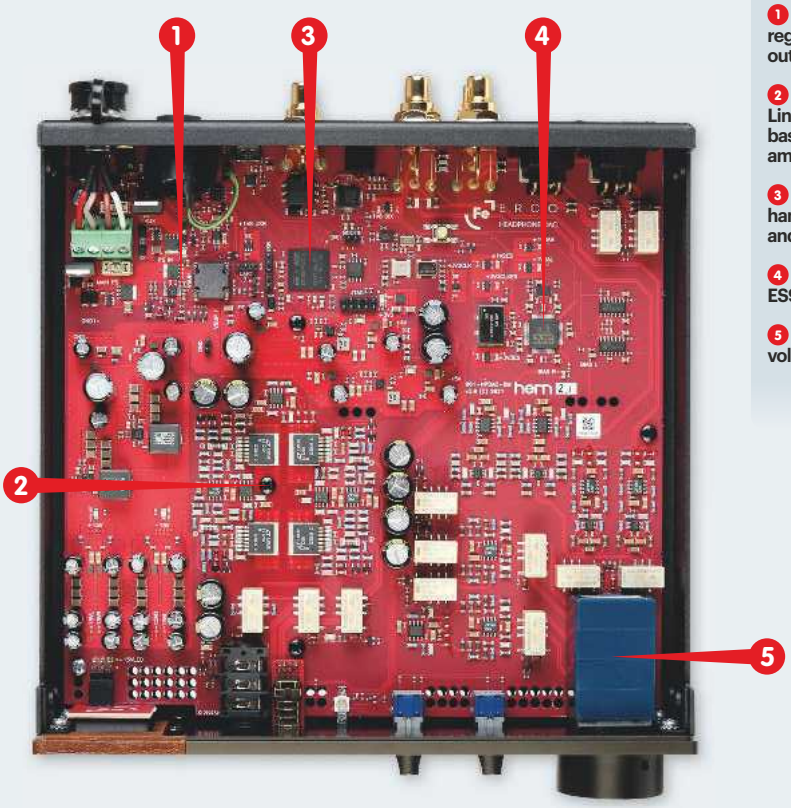
IN SIGHT



1. PSU filtering/ regulation from outboard supply
2. Fully balanced Linear Technologies-based headphone amp
3. ARM processor handles USB input and MQA
4. Single ESS ES9028PRO DAC
5. High-quality ALPS volume control

A WORK OF PEACE

The ERCO's link with Esperanto is as much a matter of philosophy and locality as it is marketing. Ludwik Lejzer Zamenhof, the bright spark who first invented the international auxiliary language while still at school back in 1873, lived just around the corner from where Ferrum is based in Warsaw.

Zamenhof's desire for a language that would cross borders and aid universal communication was born of a desire to end all wars – a rather pertinent ambition given current global events.

So that's the ERCO's inspiration. As for its personality, unlike the vast majority of DAC/headphone amplifiers where all inputs end up 'digitised', the analogue input to Ferrum's ERCO remains analogue throughout – from the fine ALPS volume control to the very capable Linear Technology-based headphone amp. The circuit design and performance show clear parallels with the dedicated Ferrum OOR, although the ERCO also has a digital heart that handles its upsampling and digital filtering (including MQA if required) of all S/PDIF and USB inputs before conversion back to analogue and routing to the headphone amp. Thus, power output notwithstanding, the performance via the ERCO's analogue and digital inputs is distinct and will likely sound different.

In its mission statement on its website, the company notes: "Zamenhof developed Esperanto pursuing peace around the world. We want to do the same through pure and honest music reproduction. In the end it brings peace to the mind."

low with the likes of Barbara Hannigan's *Dance With Me* with the Ludwig Orchestra and the amplifier settles into a lush and nostalgic shimmer that's captivating.

Hannigan's rich voice is beautifully resolved, with every single element of her breathing and phrasing readily apparent, while the orchestra has a rich 'palm court' sheen to it as it slides effortlessly from jive to samba, to a glorious Viennese waltz on the version of *I Could Have Danced All Night*. Even without any crossfeed trickery here there is a genuinely lovely sense of soundstaging and presence via headphones, helped a great deal by the airy sound of Oppo's planar magnetics. It's a fabulously old-fashioned and nostalgic-sounding set, and the ERCO enjoys every second of it, performing admirably and absolutely lapping it up.

Change pace to the Filharmonie Brno recording of Philip Glass's *12th Symphony,* a Bandcamp download via Orange Mountain Music inspired by David Bowie's underrated *Lodger* album with the orchestra complemented by organ and vocals, and the ERCO does an excellent job of opening up the dense scoring. Those cascading rhythms are tackled with confidence as it charges through the big, percussive sound of the fourth movement – *Boys Keep Swinging* – bolstered by its resolution and dynamic power.

It's all rather strangely magnificent, and the amp is just as adept when it drops down a couple of gears to the rather more intimate sound of Doug MacLeod's bluesy *A Soul To Claim* album. The ERCO focuses on MacLeod's slightly careworn voice while punching out the backing band behind him. The sense of the singer being this 'up close and personal' is uncanny. *Smoky Nights And Faded Blues* sounds just as the title suggests it should – its lazy chug driven on by the clarity of the ERCO, before the album spins into the 'lonesome whistle' opening of *Only Porter At The Station*.

The performances and recording of the Sinfonia of London/John Wilson set of *Ravel Orchestral Works* are superb, as is clear from the slow build to a crashing finish of opener *La Valse*. And in the hands of Ferrum's ERCO and a decent pair of headphones, it sounds just as wonderful as it has on the rare occasion – house empty – when played through the main system at satisfyingly high levels.

The real beauty of the ERCO is that it's compact and dead easy to setup and use

Conclusion

Without any messing about or manipulation, this amplifier just lets the music breathe and allows the huge dynamics to thrill, right the way through to the climax of the closing *Boléro* which is delivered with a drama way beyond just being 'that Torvill and Dean stuff'!

Great music, played superbly, and delivered with real impact and style – what more could one want? ●

Hi-Fi Choice OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★

FEATURES ★★★★★

LIKE: Finely detailed, finessed sound

DISLIKE: Nothing of note

WE SAY: Top of the high-end DAC/ headphone sector

OVERALL ★★★★★

How we test

Hi-Fi Choice employs the most methodical test and measurement regime in the business. Here's how we do it...

Unique group tests

Our *Group Tests* are supported by rigorous and exhaustive listening tests carried out by experts

STANDMOUNT LOUDSPEAKER GROUP TEST

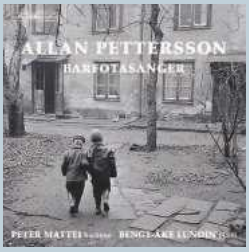
ALL SIX OF this month's loudspeaker candidates are given a few hours of general running-in before testing begins in earnest to discern toe-in and proximity to the rear wall. Those speakers that come equipped with bungs are tested both with and without them in place. All cabinets are placed on a pair of dedicated Soundstyle Z60 speaker stands before levels are set with a pink noise test tone and by checking the voltage at their terminals with a meter. The real-world sensitivity differences between the six models here is sufficiently small that only relatively fine adjustment is required.

With this done, the music test programme is played from a Lenovo T15p ThinkPad running the Qobuz desktop app and wired directly to iFi Audio's ZEN DAC v2 via a USB cable. All six standmounts are tested back to back before a process of returning to specific models playing certain tracks to further examine any initially noted strengths and weaknesses. With this done, the speakers are then put through a few hours of more general listening to help further identify any other overall character and performance traits.

As with all of our *Group Tests*, as well as comparing their out-and-out performance, the design, build, price and overall feel of the speakers is taken into consideration before establishing the final placing order.

TEST MUSIC

ALLAN PETTERSON
Mitt hjärta behöver ett litet barn
Barfotasånger



JOAN ARMATRADING
All The Way From America
Me Myself I

GRIFF
Black Hole
One Foot In Front Of The Other

ROO PANES
Little Giant
Little Giant

REFERENCE SYSTEM

INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER:
Rega io **£420** ***HFC* 464**

Everything you need in an integrated amplifier and absolutely nothing you don't, the io's 30W of power is more than enough for any of the speakers in the group and it delivers a performance that is consistently and invigoratingly musical.

STREAMING SERVICE:
Qobuz **£12.99/m** ***HFC* 487**

Fresh from its recent *Group Test* success, Qobuz is the best way of gaining access to a comprehensive library, a significant amount of which is in hi-res, via an excellent interface available across a number of platforms.

qobuz

DAC:
iFi ZEN DAC v2 **£160** ***HFC* 480**

An absurdly capable bit of kit for the price, the ZEN DAC v2 combines excellent decoding hardware with a carefully arranged circuit full of high-quality components. It's a great DAC and a more than reasonable headphone amp too.

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accuracy in sound

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Grouptest

STANDMOUNT LOUDSPEAKERS £230-£470

Speaking clearly

The affordable speaker market is now packed with clever designs being sold at very competitive prices. ***Ed Selley*** sorts his way though six contestants

WHEN I WAS a teenager in the Nineties, the roughly annual *Group Test* of £150-£200 standmount speakers that appeared in these pages was something of a highlight. For one thing, it was enormous; contested by swathes of companies all looking to get you hooked on their offerings and hopefully make you a customer for life. As the tests unfurled, the tussle to unveil the eventual winner was genuinely dramatic. The victor would then go on to be an object of lust for myself and like-minded friends to save up for.

Something that has really only become apparent with hindsight, however, is that while there were a great many participants in each test, the actual level of variation among them was fairly limited. A simple cabinet contained a pair of drivers and it was relatively minor technical variations between them that made the real difference. Fast forward a quarter of a century and the affordable speaker market is still keenly contested. The number of companies in the running has reduced slightly and the prices have crept up (although not by as much as the rate of inflation suggests it should have), but this is a reflection that some of the speakers that contest this annual roundup are astonishingly sophisticated designs that leverage mass production and clever parts-sharing to bring features to this price point that would have been unthinkable just a few years ago.

This means that the standard is incredibly high; any one of the six offerings here beamed back to those

The budget speaker sector remains one of the most keenly contested

Nineties battle royales would have issued a swift kicking to all comers and quite possibly worried speakers that cost the same amount then as they do now into the bargain. This sextet covers a £240 price spread and an intriguing variety of sizes, materials and design practices. Which one of them is able to deliver the best balance of performance and value? Read on to find out.

ON TEST

Fyne Audio F300 £230 p36
The most compact and affordable Fyne Audio speaker you can buy, the F300 is the also the smallest and cheapest here, combining a 125mm mid/bass driver with a 25mm tweeter in a compact cabinet that can be wall mounted.

Jamo C 93 II £470 p38
The C 93 II is the larger of two standmounts in Jamo's Concert range and the most expensive cabinet in the group. The Jamo makes use of a Hybrid Composition Conical Cone designed to offer the benefits of multiple different alternatives.

Mission LX-3 MKII £280 p40
The largest of three standmount models in the LX range, the LX-3 MKII combines traditional Mission trademarks like the tweeter positioned underneath the mid/bass driver with sophisticated new ideas like the DiaDrive mid/bass unit

Monitor Audio Bronze 100 £280 p42
The latest in a range of loudspeakers that dates back decades, the Bronze 100 is the largest cabinet in the group and the only one here to employ metal drive units – something of a Monitor Audio tradition – alongside the option for bi-wiring around the back.

Q Acoustics 3030i £350 p44
The biggest of the i Series standmounts, the 3030i takes the same ingredients as the rest of the range; a conventional (albeit bespoke) pair of drivers mounted in a cabinet that borrows isolation from its more expensive brethren.

Triangle Borea BR03 £350 p47
The most sensitive speaker in the pack (a Triangle trademark), the Borea BR03 mounts the combination of a silk dome tweeter with a treated cellulose mid/bass driver in the only front-ported cabinet in the group.

HIGH FREQUENCY DE-COUPLED
Q ACOUSTICS
TRIANGLE
Jamo

Fyne Audio F300 £230

Hi-Fi Choice RECOMMENDED

The F300 might be small in stature, but it makes up for it by being big on engagement and character

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Fyne Audio F300

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
Standmount loudspeaker

WEIGHT
3.7kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
156 x 250 x 211mm

FEATURES
- 25mm polyester dome tweeter
- 125mm multi-fibre mid/bass driver
- Quoted sensitivity: 87dB/1W/1m (8ohm)

DISTRIBUTOR
Fyne Audio

As one of the older designs in the group, the F300 is the smallest member of Fyne's F300 Series that represents the most affordable it produces. This price point precludes the use of the concentric driver arrangement that characterises the rest of the range, so the F300 makes do with a separate tweeter and mid/bass driver like the others here.

These are relatively conventional drivers. The 25mm tweeter is made from polyester and mounted behind a mesh grille that includes a phase loss compensation system that delays the output from specific areas of the tweeter to ensure a more even performance. This hands over to a 125mm multi-fibre mid/bass driver at 3.4kHz via a crossover fitted for single wire connection. As the smallest speaker in the group, the F300 cannot match some of the numbers claimed by rivals. Low frequency roll-off is claimed to be 54Hz, albeit at the less demanding +/-6dB figure. The 87dB sensitivity and 8ohm stated impedance should make this an undemanding speaker to drive, though.

Aesthetically, the F300 is very pleasant if not outstanding. Some styling features like the Piano Black strip at the top of the cabinet and the fluted surround with prominent baffle that look good on the larger models end up looking a little congested and fussy on a cabinet this small. The F300 is built to a standard commensurate with others in the group, however, despite being the most affordable here. Meanwhile, those compact dimensions mean it's the only one with a keyhole on the back for wall mounting; although you'll probably need to restrict the flow through the rear port to make the most effective use of this.

Sound quality

Absolutely integral to the manner in which the Fyne performs is that, while it's comfortably the smallest offering in the group, the level of disadvantage it finds itself at is rather less than you might expect. Key to how the F300 manages to overcome its issues of scale is by creating one of the more expansive and believable stereo images. It presents *Mitt hjärta behöver ett litet barn* with compelling scale and three dimensionality. Peter Mattei is discernible as being a little distance from the piano and he sounds tonally real if not as detailed as on some speakers in the group.

This tonal realism is something that helps with *Little Giant* too. Roo Panes is a textured, nuanced and fundamentally believable presence that anchors the performance. Some of the weight that he possesses elsewhere is less apparent, but not to the extent that the Fyne ceases to be enjoyable. Again, the ability to create a genuinely compelling stereo image

It might be one of the smallest here, but it still creates the most expansive images

helps to engage you to what it is doing. This is slightly less effective with Joan Armatrading. The track benefits from low-end weight rather than out-and-out bass extension and the F300 has to concede to the laws of physics, although Armatrading herself sounds good.

Oddly, the rather more muscular presentation of *Black Hole* is not as much of an issue for the Fyne as the gentler Armatrading one. There are two reasons for this. The first is there's enough low-end shove to win you over even if rivals have more. The second is that the timing and cohesion of the F300 is very good, giving it better control than some bigger rivals here. It starts and stops with commendable immediacy while anchoring Sarah Faith Griffiths in the centre of the presentation and giving her vocals an appealing amount of detail and tonal richness ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★½
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★☆
EASE OF DRIVE ★★★★½

LIKE: Stereo image; tonality and timing

DISLIKE: Low-end weight is lacking; fussy appearance

WE SAY: Delivers an engaging presentation, which combined with the price and sensitivity make it an excellent budget option

OVERALL ★★★★½

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Jamo C 93 II £470

The Danish company resurrects its famous Concert name with pleasingly melodious results

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Jamo C 93 II

ORIGIN
Denmark/China

TYPE
Standmount loudspeaker

WEIGHT
6.4kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
200 x 350 x 259mm

FEATURES
- 25mm silk dome tweeter
- 152mm Hybrid Composition Conical Cone mid/bass driver
- Quoted sensitivity: 88dB/1W/1m (6ohm)

DISTRIBUTOR
Henley Audio Ltd.

After a few years absent from the UK, Jamo made a welcome retuned with its affordable but capable S Series of speakers. The Concert range is the next rung up and comprises four stereo models of which the C 93 II is the larger of two standmount options. Larger or not, this is still one of the smallest in the group. The 152mm mid/bass driver is partnered with a 25mm silk dome tweeter.

The mid/bass driver is the more interesting of the two. Jamo calls it a Hybrid Composition Conical Cone, which comprises a tightly woven substance that the company claims combines the stiffness of aluminium and titanium with the smoothness of a wood fibre design. This is mounted in a long-throw surround, which gives the C 93 II a claimed low frequency roll-off of 45Hz at +/-3dB. The tweeter is mounted in a fairly prominent waveguide to help the overall dispersion. These two drivers are set in a distinctive baffle that has a curved edge (which sticks out quite a considerable distance from the flat-sided cabinet).

This baffle and cabinet arrangement looks a little odd, but the speaker itself is well assembled and little details like the metal phase plug and trim rings brighten up what would otherwise be a fairly sober-looking design. The quoted sensitivity of 88dB/W and 6ohm impedance are fairly benign and should not be too challenging for most amplifiers. The biggest catch for the Jamo is that, considering it's the most expensive speaker here, there is very little that differentiates it from the more affordable models in terms of its overall build and feel.

Sound quality

In some ways, the lack of visual differentiation between the Jamo and the other speakers in the group is partially replicated in the overall performance, which is solid but not necessarily in advance of rivals. Where the Jamo does consistently well is the creation of a stereo image. So long as a little care is taken with placement (really so you look directly into those curved baffles), the C 93 II takes *Mitt hjärta behöver ett litet barn* and creates a highly convincing and spacious soundstage.

The tonal balance is also good although, partnered with the test electronics, the Jamo is one of the brighter speakers here. Roo Panes sounds excellent, though; he's a weighty and tangible presence that moves away from the cabinets and more towards the centre of the mix. There is enough low end to the Jamo to handle the gradual increase in scale and the subtle differentiation between low-end weight and out and out bass extension is something that

Details like the metal phase plug brighten up an otherwise sober-looking design

the cabinet nullifies by being rather good at both.

The slight caveat to this is that the C 93 II can struggle a little to sound truly exciting. It handles *All The Way From America* with the same commendable space and scale as everything else, but it sounds a little uninvolving. Some of the emotion that I know to be present in Joan Armatrading's vocals feels a little absent and the presentation is a little flat. With *Black Hole*, the standmount again shows off its commendable bass performance, but it never truly delivers on the emotional side of Sarah Faith Griffith's vocals. Something that's potentially interesting, however, is that while running-in on a hefty Cambridge Audio Edge A integrated, the Jamo is considerably more dynamic, improving more than other speakers in the same situation – suggesting it has a degree of stretch to it ●

HI-FI Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★½
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★½
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★½
EASE OF DRIVE ★★★★½

LIKE: Spacious; easy to drive; well made

DISLIKE: Can struggle to sound exciting; not especially attractive

WE SAY: A capable speaker with some likeable attributes, but one that doesn't always justify its price premium over others

OVERALL ★★★★½

BAT

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Mission LX-3 MKII £280

Packed with clever engineering and some nods to Mission tradition, the LX-3 gets a great deal right

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Mission LX-3 MKII

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
Standmount loudspeaker

WEIGHT
8.4kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
226 x 345 x 300mm

FEATURES
- 25mm micro-fibre tweeter
- 165mm DiaDrive cone mid/bass driver
- Quoted sensitivity: 88dB/1W/1m (8ohm)

DISTRIBUTOR
IAG

The first generation of LX speakers represented a revitalising of the Mission name as a force in affordable speakers. As there was very little wrong with the design, Mission has elected to revise it to MKII status rather than go for a clean-sheet design. The LX-3 MKII is the largest standmount in the range and one of the larger speakers in the test.

For what is a relatively affordable standmount, the Mission incorporates some interesting technology. The most notable is the 'DiaDrive' mid/bass driver. This is a continuous profile cone that has a secondary, inner cone behind it to which the motor and voice coil are attached. In the LX-3 MKII, this is 165mm across, which adds up to a quoted low frequency roll-off of 45Hz at +/-3dB and 40Hz at the less demanding 6dB figure. This driver has the distinctive 'comb tooth' surround first seen in the QX models that is intended to scatter sonic reflections. In time-honoured Mission fashion, the 25mm microfibre tweeter is mounted below the mid/bass unit as the company claims this gives better time alignment.

Given it's one of the more affordable offerings in the group, the Mission is superbly made and finished. The heavily braced cabinet feels inert and the curved edges on the front baffle help to reduce the perceived mass. With its single rear port, quoted impedance of 8ohm and sensitivity of 88dB/W, the LX-3 should not be too challenging to drive, even for affordable amps. The styling is clean and modern too, although it's worth noting that the white finish of the cabinet is much creamier than the other two white speakers in the group (the Monitor Audio and Q Acoustics). I'm really rather partial to it, but I'm not sure everyone will be.

Sound quality

Although Mission quotes a sensitivity of 88dB, the LX-3 MKII needs a little more volume to hit the test level than some others with the same quoted figure. Having been given the necessary volume, though, it proceeds to do many things right. This is a more left/right presentation than some other speakers here, which means that *Mitt hjärta behöver ett litet barn* feels a little smaller in overall presentation, but the Mission hits back with a level of fine detail and realism that is seriously impressive. It finds nuances in Peter Mattei's performance that many rivals tend to miss and adds extra detail to the supporting piano for good measure.

The integration between the two drivers is also extremely good. *Little Giant* is a fairly midrange-focused piece of music but the Mission handles its upper frequency with a little sparkle that makes for an enjoyable listen, all the time ensuring that Roo Panes sounds as rich and vivid as he should throughout. The relatively large cabinet of the LX-3 MKII also comfortably handles the increase in scale as the track builds extremely well.

As one of the more affordable speakers here, the Mission is superbly made

The catch to all this is that the Mission can struggle to turn such considerable ability into genuine excitement. Its performance of *All The Way From America* features the same commendable tonality and detail and builds on this by filling in the lower registers with a pleasing level of weight, but the end result is oddly uninvolving. With *Black Hole*, the standmount leverages its bass extension and integration to sound controlled and sizeable, but it still isn't as much fun as I thought it might be. The biggest puzzle about this is that the smaller LX-2 MKII felt like a livelier performer than its bigger sibling despite being very similar ●

HI-FI Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★½
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★½
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★
EASE OF DRIVE ★★★★½

LIKE: Detailed, potent and well-integrated performance; good looking; well made

DISLIKE: Can struggle to sound truly exciting

WE SAY: A capable speaker that represents excellent value, but lacks a little excitement

OVERALL ★★★★½

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Monitor Audio Bronze 100 £280

The Bronze 100 brings the delights of big-driver listening to a more affordable price point

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Monitor Audio Bronze 100

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
Standmount loudspeaker

WEIGHT
7.8kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
231 x 376 x 325mm

FEATURES
- 25mm C-CAM gold dome tweeter
- 203mm C-CAM mid/bass driver
- Quoted sensitivity: 87dB/1W/1m (8ohm)

DISTRIBUTOR
Monitor Audio

Various iterations of the Monitor Audio Bronze series have been contesting these *Group Tests* for decades and, although the details have changed considerably, the basic recipe has stayed the same. The larger of two standmounts in the Bronze range, this is the only offering in the test where both drivers are made from metal. The 25mm tweeter is produced from the latest version of Monitor Audio's C-CAM (Ceramic Coated Aluminium and Magnesium) design and is set back in a waveguide to help with dispersion.

Where the Bronze 100 takes a swerve from previous generations of Bronze iterations and every other speaker here, is the mid/bass driver. This is a full 203mm (8in in old money) across and is made from a C-CAM based material which uses a newly developed concentric damping principle to maintain consistent behaviour across the cone. The bald numbers are telling. The Bronze 100 claims a low frequency roll-off of 37Hz in room, albeit at +/-6dB. This is partnered with a claimed sensitivity of 87dB/W and an impedance that is 8ohm for most of the time, ensuring that the Monitor Audio should be easy enough to drive. It is the only standmount here fitted for bi-wiring too if this is something that remains a priority for you.

Given that the bass driver is the largest in the group, the Bronze 100 has to be seen as a very neat piece of packaging. It's also the largest speaker here, but not by the margin you might expect. The overall levels of build and finish are good, but there are some styling issues that are a matter of personal taste. I don't like the fussy detailing around the tweeter and the front baffle is – presumably deliberately – a darker colour than the rest of the cabinet, which looks a little odd to my eyes.

Sound quality

More than any other speaker here, your perception of the Monitor Audio is going to be shaped by your listening preferences because in certain areas it excels. Its presentation of *Mitt hjärta behöver ett litet barn* is right up at the top of the pile. The stereo image it creates isn't the largest, but it's believable and coherent and proceeds to fill it with a piano that has a heft that other speakers here simply cannot rival. Mattei is also a full-bodied and impressively detailed presence on the recording too. This same effortless scale and weight ensures that *Little Giant* is no less enjoyable. As well as giving Roo Panes the texture and scale he needs, the Bronze 100 has a top end energy that takes a good recording like this and adds a sparkle that isn't present with some others in the group.

The stereo image isn't the largest, but it's believable and very coherent

The catch is that the Monitor Audio cannot sustain this level of ability across the whole test programme. Its take on *All The Way From America* is more of a mixed bag. That effortless heft is welcome and ensures that a track that can sound a little lightweight on some speakers is usefully filled out, but Armatrading herself appears a little lost in the instrumentation. With *Black Hole*, the slight limitation of that hefty bass driver is most noticeable. This is not an especially fast-sounding speaker. What should be a highly engaging piece of pop takes on a slightly languid quality. This isn't something that really changes if the supplied foam bungs are deployed (they do help with proximity to walls, however) and it's hard to get a truly agile presentation from the Bronze 100. Some brief tests with the bigger and more damped Cambridge Edge A don't fully cure it either ●

HI-FI Choice OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★½
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★½
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★½
EASE OF DRIVE ★★★★½

LIKE: Spacious and weighty presentation; well made

DISLIKE: Can sound sluggish; slightly fussy cosmetics

WE SAY: Used in its comfort zone the Bronze 100 excels, but it can lack a little speed and cohesion at times

OVERALL ★★★★½

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Q Acoustics 3030i £350

Hi-Fi Choice RECOMMENDED

The 3030i delivers the time-honoured virtues of QA with a few new tricks thrown in for good measure

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Q Acoustics 3030i

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
Standmount loudspeaker

WEIGHT
6.4kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
200 x 320 x 313mm

FEATURES
- 25mm soft dome tweeter
- 165mm treated paper cone mid/bass driver
- Quoted sensitivity: 88dB/1W/1m (6ohm)

DISTRIBUTOR
Armour Home Electronics

As the largest standmount in Q Acoustics' 3000i range, the 3030i is unusual because it was added to the series some time after the rest were launched, and a corresponding model with this configuration didn't appear in the preceding model range. The 3030i combines a 22mm soft dome tweeter with its prominent outer roll, which helps to give it the required dispersion while the inner dome focuses on high frequency. This tweeter uses a simplified version of the decoupling principle employed in the company's more expensive models.

This is partnered with a 165mm mid/bass driver augmented by a rear port. Like other members of the Q Acoustics family, both the tweeter and mid/bass are relatively conventional (although at this price point, they are less markedly different from the competition), but it's the cabinet where Q Acoustics has focused its efforts. The constrained layer damping of the more expensive models can't be replicated, but the point-to-point bracing process that measures the cabinet with a laser to find out where the bracing is best sited is clearly evident here. Like many of the company's designs, the frontal area of the 3030i is fairly compact but it is relatively deep.

With a claimed sensitivity of 88dB and a 6ohm impedance, the 3030i should be easy enough to drive and the claimed low frequency response of 46Hz is perfectly respectable too. I won't pretend to be a huge fan of the looks; the big chrome surround of the mid/bass driver jars with the white finish (it does look better with the darker options) and the depth of the cabinet gives it slightly odd proportions. But it's unquestionably well made and the overall level of finish is very good too.

Sound quality

The 3030i is simpler in design and execution than the more expensive Concept models from the company, but it retains one skill very much in common with them. Put a little care into its placement and it does a fabulous job of disappearing into the stereo image it creates. This means that *Mitt hjärta behöver ett litet barn* feels unforced and impressively spacious, but without tipping over into sounding diffuse or confused in any way. Within this space, the piano remains rich and weighty while Mattei's vocals are detailed and compellingly real throughout.

This spaciousness and realism is well suited to *Little Giant* too. There is an immediacy and energy to the Q Acoustics that some of the other speakers lack in comparison, and it allows Panes to sound that little bit more energetic and emphatic. The way that the 3030i handles the

Put some care into placement and it disappears into the stereo image

building scale of the track is also extremely impressive. There's both a reasonable amount of low-end weight and decent bass extension that combines to good effect.

This ensures *All The Way From America* is given a little low-end force without compromising on those upper registers, meaning that Armatrading herself is the focus of your attention and captured in a suitably emotive way. The 3030i is one of the few speakers here that turns this into something more than a reproduction. This same engagement is present in *Black Hole*, achieved while the 3030i delivers the bassline with both a reasonable, if not class-leading, level of low-end punch in a quick and rhythmically engaging way. Once again, those usefully inert cabinets provide little audible clue as to the exact location of the speakers even when pushing relatively hard ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY	★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY	★★★★★
BUILD QUALITY	★★★★½
EASE OF DRIVE	★★★★½
OVERALL	★★★★½

LIKE: Punchy, spacious, believable presentation; well made; easy to drive

DISLIKE: Looks odd; bass weight is limited

WE SAY: A talented speaker that balances realism and refinement with well-judged liveliness

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Hi-Fi Choice RECOMMENDED

Hi-Fi Choice GROUPTEST WINNER

Triangle Borea BR03 £350

The Borea takes the basic ingredients of an affordable standmount and makes something special from them

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Triangle Borea BR03

ORIGIN
France/China

TYPE
Standmount loudspeaker

WEIGHT
6kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
206 x 380 x 314mm

FEATURES
- 25mm soft dome tweeter with EFS
- 160mm natural cellulose cone mid/bass driver
- Quoted sensitivity: 90dB/1W/1m (8ohm)

DISTRIBUTOR
Exertis UK Ltd.

Borea is the most affordable range in Triangle's lineup. It has five stereo models in it, of which the BR03 is the larger of two standmounts. By the standards of a company that has created some very idiosyncratic products in the past, the technology at work here is relatively conventional although largely in keeping with the rest of the models in the test.

The BR03 combines a 160mm natural cellulose mid/bass driver which also sees service in the range of speakers above, with a 25mm silk dome tweeter. This employs a technology called Efficient Flow System, which is a combination phase plug and waveguide intended to ensure that dispersion is even and consistent. Something unique to the Triangle in this group is that it's the only front-ported speaker here. In reality, this doesn't mean that the BR03 is significantly more forgiving of being placed closer to walls than its rear-ported brethren, but it certainly helps a little.

Something that does make more of an appreciable difference is that the BR03 is the most sensitive speaker here. The claimed 90dB/W sensitivity and 8ohm impedance (albeit with a minimum quoted figure of 4.2ohm) suggest a speaker that's very easy to drive. This has been achieved without any significant effect on the frequency response either, with a quoted low frequency roll-off of 46Hz at +/-3dB. In terms of styling, the Triangle is a fine example of industrial design. It has enough detailing to be interesting without coming across as fussy. The range of colour options is good and the overall level of build and finish is of a very high standard. This is one of the more expensive options here, but at least you can see where some of that cost has gone.

Sound quality

Whether or not the BR03 is quite as sensitive as the claimed figures suggest is not completely possible to ascertain within the boundaries of this test, but it needs the lowest overall volume on the io to hit the test listening level. Having done this, the BR03 sets about exhibiting a balance of virtues that no other speaker here combines so well. It presents *Mitt hjärta behöver ett litet barn* in a spacious and believable soundstage and proceeds to give a pleasing sense of weight and texture to the piano while imbuing Mattei's vocals with an impressive level of energy and realism.

This energy is something that infuses *Little Giant* and results in the best rendition in the test. The BR03 has a level of treble energy that has been achieved without the end result feeling bright or edgy and it adds an engaging life to both Roo Panes and the supporting instruments. As the

The Borea BR03 needs the lowest volume on the io to hit the test level

scale of the track grows, the BR03 is well able to manage the increase without any discernible strain. The bass response is also extremely good. There are speakers here that go deeper, but the integration across the frequency response is truly excellent. *All The Way From America* is given a level of heft that helps to fill out the track and ensure that the emotional quotient of Armatrading's performance is well covered off too.

The BR03 doesn't let up with *Black Hole* either. There's a simple level of get up and go to the Triangle that allows it to display an effortless level of timing and attack with material like this while never losing its civility and composure at the top end. Sarah Faith Griffiths sounds fantastic, with a vibrancy and realism to her vocals that stems from the excellent detail retrieval and that same impressive treble energy ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY	★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY	★★★★★
BUILD QUALITY	★★★★½
EASE OF DRIVE	★★★★★

LIKE: Wonderful combination of energy and refinement; looks good; well made

DISLIKE: Not the most seismic speaker going

WE SAY: The Triangle delivers a performance combination that is very, very hard to beat at the price

OVERALL ★★★★★

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- AIRPLAY
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- SPOTIFY CONNECT, HRA
- UNITY CHASSIS II
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- MULTI-ROOM AUDIO
- ROON ENDPOINT

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AURALIC PRESS AWARDS

Group test verdict

The margins of success are very tight at price points like this ***Ed Selley*** discovers as he breaks down the final rankings

THERE ARE NO bad speakers here and all of them display some specific virtues. In the case of the Jamo C 93 II, it's mentioned first purely because while its performance and build is completely competitive with the group, it costs over £100 more than the next most expensive model.

The Monitor Audio Bronze 100 by contrast is well made and competitively priced. If your musical tastes include classical and acoustic arrangements you'll benefit from is effortless combination of soundstage and scale, but its failings with faster material limit its all-round competitiveness.

The Fyne Audio F300 and Mission LX-3 MkII represent two different solutions with opposing vices and virtues. The diminutive F300 has to cede some scale and extension to the bigger speakers in the group, but it is a gloriously involving and communicative speaker and – at some of the prices it appears at online in particular – it has to be seen as a bit of a bargain. The Mission is a bigger, more authoritative and ultimately more capable option and in terms of the technology and finish, no less of a bargain. It would benefit from a little of the sense of fun that the Fyne has in spades, though. It's still a great speaker nonetheless.

The Q Acoustics 3030i is a happier combination of these various virtues. It manages to balance technical ability in terms of scale, tonal realism, bass extension and control with a sense of fun and engagement that strikes the right balance across a wide selection of music. In true Q Acoustics fashion, it's unfussy about placement, easy to drive and well made. Being extra picky, there are limits to bass extension and it's not an especially attractive speaker to look at.

WINNER

The Borea BR03 does everything the 3030i can and adds an even more well-judged sense of energy and fun to its performance combined with a build that's every bit as good and looks that will allow it to sit in a variety of settings without jarring. It's a superb standmount.

Make/model	Fyne Audio F300	Jamo C 93 II	Mission LX-3 MKII	Monitor Audio Bronze 100	Q Acoustics 3030i	Triangle Borea BR03
Price	£230	£470	£280	£280	£350	£350
Sound	★★★★½	★★★★☆	★★★★☆	★★★★☆	★★★★★	★★★★★
Value	★★★★★	★★★★☆	★★★★½	★★★★½	★★★★★	★★★★★
Build	★★★★☆	★★★★½	★★★★★	★★★★½	★★★★½	★★★★½
Features	★★★★½	★★★★½	★★★★☆	★★★★☆	★★★★½	★★★★★
Overall	★★★★½	★★★★☆	★★★★☆	★★★★☆	★★★★½	★★★★★
	Combined with its price, sensitivity and engagement this is a great budget option	Many likeable attributes, but it doesn't always justify its price over rivals	It represents excellent value for money, but lacks a little excitement	Superb in its comfort zone, but it lacks a little speed and cohesion at times	A superb balance of realism and refinement with well-judged liveliness	Delivers the sort of performance that is very hard to beat at the price
Website	fyneaudio.com	jamo.com	mission.co.uk	monitoraudio.com	qacoustics.com	trianglehifi.com

Key features

Tweeter	25mm polyester	25mm silk	25mm microfibre	25mm C-CAM	25mm soft	25mm EFS
Mid/bass driver	125mm multi-fibre	152mm HCCC	165mm DiaDrive	203mm C-CAM	165mm treated paper	160mm natural cellulose
Ported	Rear	Rear	Rear	Rear	Rear	Front
Sensitivity	87dB	88dB	88dB	87dB	88dB	90dB
Power handling	70W	120W	120W	100W	70W	100W
Freq. response	54Hz-28kHz	45Hz-24kHz	45Hz-20kHz	37Hz-30kHz	46Hz-30kHz	46Hz-22kHz

TRY WITH THESE

TURNTABLE:
Pro-Ject Debut Carbon EVO £450 *HFC* 468
The current champion of the sub-£500 turntable market, the Carbon EVO delivers an outstanding performance out of the box, but also offers the possibility of considerable future stretch thanks to the available upgrades.

CD PLAYER:
Rotel CD11 Tribute £400 *HFC* 469
The CD11 Tribute is the matching partner to the A11 and can lay claim to being one of the most affordable digital sources that delivers a performance that goes beyond basic technical excellence and into genuine emotional engagement.

INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER:
Rotel A11 Tribute £500 *HFC* 469
The Tribute is a talented budget amp lifted to something more special by the application of a little Ishiwata magic. It excels at delivering the musical message as well as the technical attributes of whatever you choose to listen to.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Kalista DreamPlay XC

ORIGIN
France

TYPE
SACD/DAC/network player with outboard PSU

WEIGHT
17.3kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
445 x 125 x 430mm

FEATURES
- CD and SACD playback
- Digital inputs: Ethernet, USB
- Digital outputs: AES/EBU; I²S (on HDMI); coaxial
- Up to 384kHz PCM and DSD256

DISTRIBUTOR
Airtaudio Ltd, UK

WEBSITE
kalista.audio
airtaudio.com

Hi-Fi Choice RECOMMENDED

The French Revolution

The first SACD player from French audio artisan, Kalista, is also this spin-off brand's most comprehensive digital hub to date. You'll need to win the lottery, though...

Having emerged from French manufacturer Métronome Technologie with its inaugural model in 2003 – think Citroën spawning DS, or Seat's Cupra line – Kalista now has a growing range of DreamPlay products. This includes the £21,000 Kalista STREAM – described as: "The only streamer on the market that combines perfect functionality with exceptional looks" – and a turntable, the £44,000 Twenty-Twenty.

All have in common striking looks and all-French construction, being assembled by the company in-house in southern France. All the control, digital and analogue electronics are embedded into a tripod layout of aluminium and thick slabs of clear methacrylate to form the 'legs', finished with stainless steel spiked feet. This suspends the central mechanism and contributes to the substantial 17kg all-up mass of the machine, on the front of which sits a new 75mm slanted circular touchscreen for operation.

There are currently two different versions of the player available, finished in silver (natural anodised) or what the manufacturer calls Black Pearl for a £1,500 premium. The £51,000 DreamPlay X is a CD/SACD transport-only device, offering a range of digital outputs, while the £58,000 XC adds onboard conversion for formats up to 384kHz and DSD256 via both unbalanced RCA and balanced XLR outputs. Common to both is not just the aforementioned CD and SACD playback, but also a full streaming implementation with Ethernet and wi-fi networking, plus a USB input in addition to its I²S (on HDMI), coaxial and AES/EBU digital outputs.

SACD is as significant an addition as the streaming engine and is made possible by a disc transport that's been sourced from Denon/Marantz parent company Sound United. The mechanism is modified in-house. As with past players, Kalista's DreamPlay X is a top-loader, with a precision K-branded puck holding the disc firmly in place on the spindle beneath a substantial sliding cover. The company has gone for top loaders in previous players, but typically in a 'naked' turntable-inspired form.

The DreamPlay XC is never anything other than big, rich and supremely generous

Meanwhile the DreamPlay XC player adds to its flexibility by having both fixed and variable level outputs, allowing it to be used straight into power amplification or active speakers. This preamp function uses the Leedh digital processing/volume

algorithm and allows the company to legitimately claim the product as four devices in one (CD/SACD player, streamer, DAC and digital preamp). It also boasts that it offers: "the purest sound perfection and the most fluid interface". That'll be the aforementioned touchscreen control panel, then, which, as well as handling basic transport functions also allows the user to dig deeper into the various digital filtering and upsampling options. There's also a gorgeous-looking, sleek metal-clad remote-control handset.

Tower of power

Common to both DreamPlay X/XC models is the offboard Elektra power supply, which despite a sculpted finish to its front-panel and substantial 21.7kg weight is every bit as ordinary-looking as the player is striking. It appears for all the world like a compact tower computer, with just a power LED on the front and a mains input, switch and two outputs on the rear. These are marked DAC and Drive, and connect to the DreamPlay XC via two multicore cables. If you're using the X version purely as a streaming transport, only one cable is connected to the single power input on the rear panel of the 'head unit'.

The streaming implementation handles not just content stored on local network storage conveyed via UPnP – PCM-based data at up to 32-bit/384kHz and DSD to DSD256 – but also Deezer, Qobuz, Spotify and Tidal, the last complete with MQA decoding. You can even, should you wish, use the DreamPlay XC to listen to your favourite internet radio streams via vTuner.

It's debatable whether such streaming services will be capable of delivering the kind of sound quality the player is designed to accomplish from higher-resolution content, and indeed wi-fi via the little stub antenna presents more of a challenge for hi-res streaming than it does the wired Ethernet connection, but that kind of misses the point.

The DreamPlay XC may be intended and engineered for the absolute ultimate performance, but, of course, it must also live with the rest of us in the real world, where users might occasionally want to stream content for convenience when they're not listening to their CDs, SACDs or hi-res files. A high-end machine with practicality? If it can be achieved without impinging on performance, then why the hell not?

Before we get stuck into the fabulous sound, a word about the digital filters provided by the ESS Sabre ES9038PRO DAC within the DreamPlay XC. These are all accessible from the touchscreen menus whether playing from network, online sources or disc, and you can also navigate them via the remote handset, although the multiple key presses aren't exactly intuitive. As for the filters themselves, we discover that they offer the usual mixed bag of inconsistencies and far too much time can be wasted experimenting with different digital filters without any reliable favourite actually being decided upon.

HOW IT COMPARES

If you have a fiscal furnace burning more than a mere 'hole' in your pocket then the DreamPlay XC really only has one ultra high-end competitor to douse the flames – the dCS Vivaldi One. Launched five years ago as a limited-edition CD/SACD/USB player/DAC, this large machine with its 'wavy' alloy fascia and advanced DXD/DSD upsample options delivered a state-of-the-art sound, combining precision with a rare musical presence. The Vivaldi One's existing owners are now being offered a new APEX Ring DAC update but 50 lucky audiophiles can also purchase an entirely new machine for £76,500...

Sound quality

Far more consistent, however, is our preference for using the DreamPlay XC merely as a player/streamer, rather than invoking its digital volume control in preamp mode. Here we find that the sound is softer and a shade less dynamic, so we decide to stick with the fixed output. Metronome/Kalista's suggested control app is ConversDigital's familiar mConnect running on a tablet or smartphone. We also take the time to experiment with several other UPnP packages on a tablet and computer and happily experience little in the way of problems.

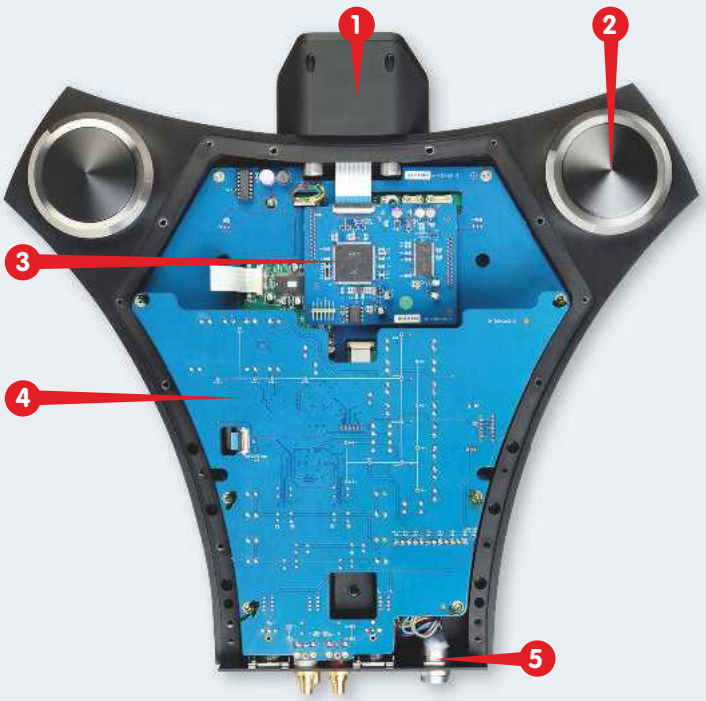
Nevertheless, our early sessions with the DreamPlay XC involve spinning more than a few CDs and SACDs – something of a nostalgic experience, given that so much music these days is stored on servers. The DreamPlay XC proves to be simple to use, with snappy disc-loading and access times with both kinds of disc, and an easy push-button layer-switch for hybrid discs via the remote handset.

The DreamPlay XC has been designed as a super practical high-end machine

Starting off on something of an Eighties tip by loading up Frankie Goes To Hollywood's *Rage Hard: The Sonic Collection* and playing *Welcome To The Pleasuredome*, we are immediately impressed by the detailed handling of the track's opening, with its ambient birdsong effects, but slightly less enamoured of the pounding beats of the main section. There is bags of information here, but the pace is somewhat tempered with the drama of Trevor Horn's thundering production sounding restrained rather than relentless. ▶

Kalista's 'brand signature' of thick, precision-cut acrylic with a milled alloy chassis is instantly recognisable... if you are an audiophile!

IN SIGHT



1. The DreamPlay XC's 'nose' includes a 75mm-diameter touch-sensitive display
2. The chassis is supported on three stainless steel spiked feet
3. ARM processor runs Kalista's custom DSP software
4. The ESS ES9038PRO DAC and fully balanced analogue electronics are hosted under the mainboard
5. Separate PSU inputs for the transport and DAC sections of the DreamPlay XC

The player is seemingly much more at home with one of the mainstays of the early days of CD – Dire Straits' *Brothers In Arms* both from an original 'free with a CD player' 1985 CD copy and the 2005 remastered 20th anniversary SACD.

The added clarity, impact and detail of the CD layer of the remastered disc is further built upon when switching to SACD, but even the original sounds crisp and clean via the DreamPlay XC. That is true whether with all seven minutes of the ironic MTV anthem *Money For Nothing*, which bounces along impressively with good clarity in the rhythm section behind that trademark Knopfler guitar sound, or the more contemplative title track closing the set, which sees this French disc player doing a fine job coping with both the husky vocal and the blistering guitar solos.

The detailed sound of the player is also well suited to the Dunedin Consort's 2018 'small ensemble' recording of *Bach's St John Passion* on SACD: again, the Super Audio layer bringing out more of the sense of space in the acoustic, and especially in director John Butt's solo keyboard additions framing the main work. But the sound here is a little darker and arguably a little less free-breathing, than we're used to, whether comparing the DreamPlay XC's disc playback or its streaming capabilities. This doesn't detract from the very fine way the player handles the textures of the instruments and voices, but in some systems it might diminish the sense of drama in the performance and the feeling of a liturgical event the recording usually conjures up.

For all that, this is a balance many will surely find exceptionally pleasing. The DreamPlay XC is never anything other than big, rich and generous in the way it plays music, whether that's from disc, network stores, USB or even online streams. It even sounds rather special when playing concerts from Radio 3's internet stream.

As well as the 75mm slanted touchscreen control panel there's a remote handset

On more than one occasion we drop into the beginning of the channel's *Afternoon Concert* strand only to find that we're still contentedly listening by the time the programme has ended a couple of hours later.

As mentioned earlier about these streaming services, they may not offer the sheer quality available elsewhere, but they're a very useful function to have – in the case of vTuner, it's free music after all, and a lot of it from around the world – and the DreamPlay XC delivers it in a consistently enjoyable fashion. Radio 3's stream may only be 320kbps AAC at best, but the music still manages to communicate well via this player.

Push up into the DXD and DSD resolutions the DreamPlay XC supports via its network connection and while that warmth and smoothness remains, the player is fully able to demonstrate the advantages of more data being moved to deliver the music.

Play trumpeter Angelo Verploegen's relaxed *When Night Falls* set – a typically intimate recording from the Just Listen label – and the result is a remarkably effective evocation of the three musicians: Ed Verhoeff on guitar and Eric van Der Westen on bass plus, of course, Angelo himself – just sitting down and playing together, recorded straight to DSD256. Yes, there are other network players that might bring out more of the studio ambience, but very few will match the wonderful late-night cosiness going on via the DreamPlay XC, entirely befitting the gentle theme of these sessions.

Conclusion

Similarly, the 2021 Metropolitan Opera live recording of Philip Glass' *Akhnaten* (via Orange Mountain Music's Bandcamp download) packs quite a hefty wallop in the more than capable hands of this player. It's heard in the repeating rhythms of the *Prelude*, the thundering ritualist percussion and deep voices of the funeral sequence opening *Act 1*, and also in the chimes and soaring duet of counter tenor Anthony Roth Costanzo and mezzo J'Nai Bridges in the absolutely stunning *The Window Of Appearances*. In short, it all sounds gloriously unusual and extremely dramatic in its other-worldliness, a sentiment that might just as easily be extended to the overall visceral visual and aural impact of the DreamPlay XC itself! ●

Hi-Fi Choice OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★☆☆
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★
FEATURES ★★★★½

LIKE: Striking looks; characterful sound

DISLIKE: Price

WE SAY: A true 'statement' machine in every conceivable way

OVERALL ★★★★½

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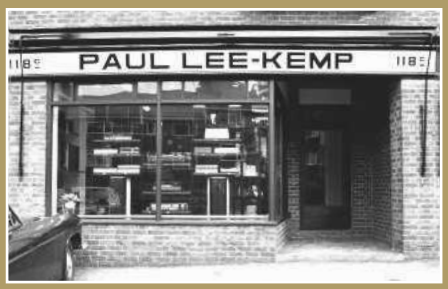
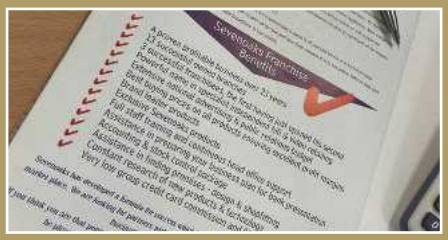
It's an incredible 50 years since Paul Lee-Kemp launched a new breed of specialist hi-fi store, starting out with one tiny shop in Sevenoaks.



THE EARLY YEARS

Our beginnings were modest! Back in 1972, Paul Lee-Kemp (widely known as PLK), a 21-year-old who was fresh out of university, had a desire to do something different for those who loved music. With the help of a small loan from his father, he opened his first Hi-Fi shop in Sevenoaks, Kent. Soon, PLK was hunting for additional premises and along with Peter O'Brien, who became a long standing, trusted business partner, they opened the second Sevenoaks Hi-Fi branch in Woolwich, South East London. By 1980, stores in Chatham, Tunbridge Wells and Brighton had also opened, with another four stores added by 1990.



WE OPEN OUR FIRST FRANCHISES

It was in the mid-90s that the partners decided to accelerate our expansion so in 1995 they launched the Sevenoaks franchise model, and the brand rapidly expanded with another 30 Sevenoaks stores opening, stretching across the UK from Aberdeen to Plymouth.

INTO THE 2000s

In the early 2000s, the company made some structural changes including changing the name to Sevenoaks Sound and Vision, to reflect the importance of TVs and home cinema to the business. In 2014 PLK took a back seat from the day-to-day running of the business, handing over to current Managing Director, Rob Lawley. Rob and his team continue to maintain the ethos of fairness to all that has been there since day one and sets the company apart from many of its competitors.

SEVENOAKS NOW

The early lessons have served us well and continue to do so. Our treatment of customers, partners, suppliers and colleagues is renowned throughout the consumer electronics industry, and for all the right reasons. We work hard at maintaining and improving our service to our customers while always remaining competitively priced. Most importantly we are not sitting still! Our plan is to open more stores to provide our customers with more choice, less travelling time, and tailor-made, informed, sensible advice, as well as continuing to strive to make our online services and deliveries even quicker and slicker.

OUR 50TH CELEBRATIONS

This is a big year for us, it is a real milestone that very few in our industry can justifiably claim. So we want to do something special for our customers throughout the year. We will be having events in store, competitions and special offers; to keep up to date, just sign up to receive our newsletter.

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ARCAM • ST60 • MUSIC STREAMER

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NAIM • UNITI ATOM HDMI • STREAMING SYSTEM

Naim Uniti Atom is perfect as a high-end main system or even for use in the kitchen or study, where space is at a premium.

NEW £1299

NAD • C 700 • BLUOS STREAMING SYSTEM

An ideal all-in-one solution for the streaming age. Just connect your speakers, then select the music you want to hear using the intuitive BluOS app on your smartphone, tablet, PC, or Mac.

NEW £2399

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NAD • M33 • BLUOS STREAMING AMPLIFIER

This 200W streaming amplifier features Purifi's Ultra-Quiet Amplification Technology, BluOS multi-room streaming, a 32-bit DAC, full MQA decoding and Dirac room correction.

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NEW **£1225**

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A true three-way speaker, the 165mm bass driver pushes bass performance to new extremes. The 125mm midrange driver and 25mm aluminium dome tweeter creates a Uni-Q array that defies the expectations from the most compact main speaker in the range.

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Price excludes speaker stands

PMC • TWENTY5·23i

Discreet and elegant floorstanding speaker, perfect for filling medium-sized rooms with transparent, authentic dynamics and effortlessly extended bass. It will make the best of both affordable and high-end electronics and amplification.

£3995

FOCAL • KANTA NO.1

This bookshelf loudspeaker will discreetly blend into any unit or stand: it is the perfect solution for rooms under 270 ft2 (25 m²). Entirely dedicated to acoustic performance and with a resolutely personal aesthetic: that, in a nutshell, is the Kanta DNA!

£4999

Price excludes speaker stands

WHARFEDALE DIAMOND 12.3

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naim

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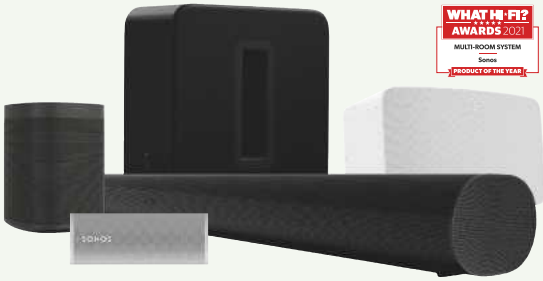

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Why have cotton...

As Mark Levinson enters the Bluetooth headphone market for the first time, ***Cliff Joseph*** tries the luxury on for size

Mark Levinson is an unashamedly luxury brand and its decision to enter the competitive market for Bluetooth headphones is something of a surprise. What isn't quite so surprising is that its N°5909 makes absolutely no compromises whatsoever, offering "luxury listening on the go", with hi-res audio support, impressive battery, active noise cancellation (ANC) and a number of versatile connectivity features.

The build quality is impeccable, with the headband and hinges constructed out of lightweight but sturdy aluminium. The adjustable headband and replaceable earpieces are wrapped in leather and padded with memory foam, and the earpieces can be chosen with a metallic tinted paint in either black, red or silvery-grey 'ice pewter'. The headphone weighs 340g, but feels light and comfortable enough to wear for long periods with no trouble at all.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Mark Levinson N°5909

ORIGIN
US/China

TYPE
Over-ear Bluetooth/wired headphone

WEIGHT
340g

FEATURES
- 40mm Beryllium coated drivers
- Bundled cables: 1.25m 3.5mm; 1.25m USB-C; 4m USB-C
- 3.5mm-6.3mm, USB-A and airline adaptors

DISTRIBUTOR
Harman UK

WEBSITE
marklevinson.com
harman.com

That's just as well, since the N°5909 also provides impressive battery life (30 hours even with noise cancelling turned on or 34 when it's off). If you're travelling with a laptop, a quick 15-minute charge via the USB-C port gives an extra six hours of use.

Inside the hard-shell travelling case you'll find two USB-C-to-3.5mm audio cables – 4m and 1.25m long – as well as a pure USB-C cable for charging and using USB-Audio from laptops and mobile devices. There's a second, smaller case inside the main one, providing storage for 6.3mm, USB-A and two-prong airline adapters.

Its audio credentials are equally impressive. Inside the earpieces are 40mm Beryllium-coated drivers certified for hi-res audio up to 24-bit/96kHz. The N°5909 can even support 24-bit/96kHz in wireless mode when using Sony's LDAC codec for Bluetooth, with aptX Adaptive and

The snugly fitting earpieces provide really good passive sound isolation

AAC codecs also available. It goes all-out with its noise-cancellation features too. There's a button on the left earpiece that allows you to turn ANC on or off, or to select the 'Awareness' mode that lets some background noise in. However, the Headphone app provides additional options, with High and Low levels of noise cancellation and an 'Adaptive' mode that uses the built-in microphones to automatically adjust to best suit different locations. There's a 'voice pass' option available for the Awareness mode that selectively allows voices and higher frequencies through so you can hear when someone is talking to you.

Mark Levinson quotes an impressive frequency response of 10Hz-40kHz in passive wired mode, although this reverts to a more conventional 20Hz-20kHz with Bluetooth. There's also a small bass port on the top of each earpiece to enhance bass output, and the Headphone app includes three profiles – neutral, enhanced and attenuated – so you can adjust bass as required. It's a shame that the app doesn't provide any manual EQ controls to further fine tune the sound.

Sound quality

It's worth pointing out the company is owned by Harman Kardon, and the N°5909 is tuned to 'the Harman Curve' – a tonal response curve "that

achieves the highest subjective scoring" in tests carried out by Harman's labs over several decades. Purists may object, preferring a headphone that creates a more neutral, authentic sound, but there's always a compromise where Bluetooth and noise-cancelling technologies are involved, and the N°5909 quickly establishes itself as one of the most impressive Bluetooth headphones currently available.

The piano motif that plays through Jóhann Jóhannsson's *Flight From The City* is so gentle it barely sounds as though Jóhannsson is pressing down on the keys, but the N°5909 is able to stand back and give the sound room to breathe, catching the hesitancy in each note and then allowing it to fade gently away. The introduction of the strings adds a bittersweet tone to the piece, with an effective contrast between the slowly winding cello and the more urgent tone of violin and viola. So far, so Hollywood soundtrack, but then Jóhannsson's eerie, crackling electronic effects creates a sense of unease that keeps you on your toes, almost wandering into ambient territory as the electronic chimes float off into the distance.

The N°5909 also outdoes most of its Bluetooth rivals when it comes to picking out fine details. The electronic bass intro on Billie Eilish's *Bad Guy* is a delight – rich and deep, but bouncing along with an irresistible rhythm. It doesn't go overboard with the bass, though, and manages to catch every little breathy whisper in the song's intro, and the multi-tracked lead vocal. And when the chorus takes off, it's the crisp finger-snapping and the insistent ticking of the percussion that really drives the track forward.

However, the N°5909 really excels with the lush vocal performance of Kate Bush's 2011 re-recording of *Moments Of Pleasure*. It brings out all the warmth in Bush's vocal – a little deeper and richer than on the 1993 original – and the backing harmonies of the Waynflete Chamber Choir are heart rending in their melancholy.

I'm also pleased to find that the noise-cancellation features work well, too. The snugly fitting earpieces provide good passive sound isolation to begin with, and turning on noise cancellation is very effective at blocking out most of the low and midrange interference I throw at it, with only a little higher frequency sound leaking through at times. The N°5909 will certainly be a good option if you need noise cancellation for trains or air travel, but it's suited for more general use around town as well, and the 'voice pass' does an effective job of allowing dialogue through so you can tell when someone is talking to you.

If there's a criticism of the Bluetooth performance, it's that the sound feels a little static and isn't quite able to convincingly create a great sense of space. But, of course, the N°5909 has a wired mode as well – two in fact, although Mark Levinson recommends the 'pure passive' sound of an analogue connection, rather than USB digital audio. This immediately adds an extra dimension to the soundstage of *Moments Of Pleasure*. The gentle piano really draws me into the scene and the shimmering cymbal wafts through the air like falling snowflakes.

HOW IT COMPARES

On test last issue, Apple's AirPods Max cost £550, but is limited to Bluetooth and AAC only, with no wired option for lossless or hi-res audio. Perhaps a better rival is Yamaha's YH-L700A (*HFC* 481), which costs £450. Its 40mm drivers may not be Beryllium, but it matches the N°5909's aptX Adaptive Bluetooth, has a 34-hour battery and multiple noise-cancellation modes. The L700A can also switch into wired mode when required and offers a detailed and well-balanced sound at a competitive price.

The earpieces come in a choice of black, red or ice pewter tints

The N°5909 feels light and comfortable enough to wear for long periods of time

Conclusion

There are plenty of less expensive Bluetooth headphones available as well as less expensive wired headphones that can match the sound quality of the N°5909. However, there are few that manage to perform quite so well in both guises while also providing versatile noise-cancellation and connectivity features. That array of options comes at a price, of course, but well-heeled business travellers and existing Mark Levinson fans will probably feel that the N°5909 is worth every penny ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★½

VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★☆

BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★

FEATURES ★★★★★

LIKE: Detailed, attractive sound; excellent connectivity; superb noise cancelling

DISLIKE: Bluetooth sound needs a little more space; price

WE SAY: A luxury price, but a terrific all-round headphone for long distance travellers

OVERALL ★★★★½

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Wide load

JBL's new all-in-one is a little larger than the norm and ***David Vivian*** wonders if it has the sonic grandeur to match its size

I'm reminded of the film *Crocodile Dundee* as Paul Hogan is confronted by a mugger brandishing a modestly sized blade: 'That's not a knife,' smiles Mick, telegraphing the punchline as he reaches for his own form of outback security. '*That's* a knife'. For JBL's new all-in-one, the size matters sentiment appears to be much the same. Lined up against comparatively compact stalwarts such as Naim's Mu-So 2nd Generation (*HFC* 488), Sonus faber's Omnia (next month) and the latest iteration of B&W's Zeppelin (*HFC* 486), JBL's retro-themed all-in-one is a behemoth.

It's the latest member of JBL's Seventies-inspired Classic family sporting its iconic Quadrex foam grille hugging the gently curved baffle alongside a walnut real-wood veneer.

The driver array boasts a brace of widely spaced 25mm aluminium dome tweeters, twin 133mm white cone bass drivers and a centrally mounted 102mm midrange unit. Each is driven by a dedicated Class D amplifier contributing to a claimed total output of 350W. Connectivity is pretty comprehensive with both wired (Ethernet) and wireless (Google Chromecast) network capabilities joining Apple AirPlay 2 and Bluetooth 4.2. A 32-bit/192kHz DAC of unspecified origin is assigned to the digital heavy lifting. Wired inputs, include a moving-magnet phono stage, HDMI ARC and a 3.5mm Aux analogue input for hooking up a turntable, TV or CD player. There's even a subwoofer output.

The plastic remote control is neat and essentially duplicates the volume/input controls on top of the unit. The two must be paired before use, but the process is painless enough. Harman's MusicLife app is available for Apple and Android devices. As a bonus, there's a free 90-day trial subscription to Qobuz's hi-res streaming service, which features a playlist of different music curated by JBL's engineering and product team that was used in the development of the L75ms.

Sound quality

Is there a JBL Classic house sound? Yes. Will it float everyone's boat? Probably not. But then, if it did, it wouldn't be half as much fun. Let's be clear, this isn't monitor-class hi-fi with which to forensically interrogate a recording. It doesn't mean it isn't decently detailed or resolute. Rather, the way the L75ms plays it, such things are stealthy facilitators of the musical thrust, not the spotlit focus. It aims to please and please it does.

This means deep bass of good quality and plenty of it; the kind of presentation that allows listeners to separate what's going on without having to try too hard; smooth, refined treble that doesn't draw attention to itself; a dynamic range that supports the ability to go effortlessly loud and hit hard – all topped off by a soundstage with solid and stable imaging.

The JBL doesn't just possess these assets, but finesses them to deliver a sound that's revealing without being fussy, harmonically replete but not overly rich, rhythmically coherent without the kind of 'impressive' leading-edge emphasis that has rimshots ricocheting off the walls. So when Mavis Staples sings *Changes*, streamed from the Tidal Master of her outstanding *We Get By* album, it isn't just the smoky timbre and powerfully plaintive expression in her voice that's so engaging, but the sense of a physical, flesh-and-blood presence – good going for a separates system, but exceptional for a single box.

Conclusion

All-in-one streaming systems are on something of a roll and the standard is high. No, the JBL doesn't get the better of Naim's Mu-So 2nd Generation for transparency, speed and timing but its power, tonal warmth, dynamic reach and good-time demeanour are every bit as tempting. Another Classic class act from JBL ●

DETAILS

PRODUCT
JBL Classic L75ms

ORIGIN
China

TYPE
Wireless active loudspeaker

WEIGHT
16kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
790 x 216 x 287mm

FEATURES
- 2x 25mm aluminium dome tweeter
- 2x 133mm bass drivers
- 102mm midrange driver
- 350W Class D amplification
- 32-bit/192kHz compatible

DISTRIBUTOR
Harman UK

WEBSITE
jblsynthesis.com
harman.com

Hi-Fi Choice OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★½
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★
FEATURES ★★★★★
OVERALL ★★★★★

LIKE: Entertaining sound; effortless power; size and style

DISLIKE: Might be a little bulky for some

WE SAY: Versatile, capable and well suited to larger spaces, the L75ms is a welcome addition to the single-box sector

Desk job

David Vivian reckons some active desktop speakers are too good to be confined to the office. Take for example exhibit A80

At first glance, the printed description on the carton appears to be wrong. It states the AirPulse A80s inside are active speakers. There's a moment of disbelief on lifting them out, as they look more like the poor relation 'powered' variety. Traditional active speakers, on the other hand – say, KEF's LSX (*HFC* 456) – have separate amplifiers for each driver teamed with electronic dividing networks, often with expanded DSP options thrown in and both enclosures need to be plugged into the mains. But hold on...

The purpose of the XMOS tech AirPulse employs is to land the sonically desirable active ingredient on a simpler platform, optimising performance while making it a more convenient plug 'n' play proposition. It's an initiative that squares with AirPulse being part of the Edifier Group. The A80 is the smallest and most affordable of four A-series models (the A100, A200 and A300). All use a horn-loaded ribbon tweeter and fall under the design auspices of Phil Jones who designed Acoustic Energy's AE-1 and, indeed, founded the company that made it.

Key to the A80's neat melding of approaches rests with the power and sophistication of its 16-core XMOS XU216 digital signal processor, which uses XMOS xCore200 architecture. This joins Class D amplification from Texas Instruments with 40W devoted to the 114mm aluminium cone mid/bass driver and 10W to the aluminium diaphragm ribbon tweeter. AirPulse claims that the 768kHz PWM carrier frequency (twice the 384kHz of traditional Class D amps) is ideally suited to the ribbon and results in a smoother top end.

'Chunky' hardly does justice to the rounded-edge, rear-ported enclosures immaculately constructed from 18mm MDF and available in a choice of walnut or light blue finishes. The right-hand 'master' speaker is easily identified by its Hi-res certified sticker and the slim display strip running along the bottom that flags up the input in use. The rear panel has connections for Aux, PC, USB, optical and Bluetooth 5.0 with aptX alongside controls for volume, bass and treble tone. Thoughtfully, AirPulse bundles a pair of special acoustic isolation pads for desktop use that tilt the speakers back by 8° to angle the drivers toward the listener.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
AirPulse A80

ORIGIN
China

TYPE
Active desktop loudspeaker system

WEIGHT
9.3kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
140 x 250 x 220mm

FEATURES
- Horn loaded aluminium diaphragm ribbon tweeter
- 114mm aluminum cone with 30mm voice coil mid/bass driver
- Inputs: Aux; PC; USB; optical; Bluetooth

DISTRIBUTOR
Edifier Group

WEBSITE
Airpulseaudio.com

Sound quality

The A80 has all the right connections, including the celebrated design chops of Phil Jones in its back story. Sat on top of my regular 24in Slate Audio stands and fed a Tidal Master of Michael McDonald, Joe Walsh and Ringo Starr on the raw, raucous but deliciously bluesy *Stranger* from Edgar Winter's *Brother Johnny*, the A80 sounds clean, open and unerringly on point, if tonally a tad cool and lacking in body – not to mention low bass. Borderline bring-on-the-sub territory, I'd say. What it doesn't lack is incisiveness and insight, easily peeling back layers of detail, enabling the listener to hear right into the recording but, thankfully, without robbing McDonald of his musically muffled delivery or Ringo the full underrated value of his tastefully understated drumming. No, this isn't hi-fi for a big space, there aren't bone-cracking dynamics or tumultuous decibels, but within its necessarily intimate performance envelope it's rewardingly transparent, coherent and enjoyable across all inputs. The subtly acting tone controls are also a real bonus.

Hi-Fi Choice RECOMMENDED

Conclusion

Temptingly priced just-add-source solutions are sometimes more tempting than they are tuneful and excellent as the better, space-saving, DSP-stereo expanded single-box contenders can be, it's hard to beat a good, active, two-speaker setup such as this. No, the AirPulse A80 doesn't hit the heights of KEF's LSX, but it is around half the price and considerably more than half as good ●

Hi-Fi Choice OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY	★★★★½
VALUE FOR MONEY	★★★★★
BUILD QUALITY	★★★★★
FEATURES	★★★★★
OVERALL	★★★★★

LIKE: Compact size; insightful sound; build quality; connectivity

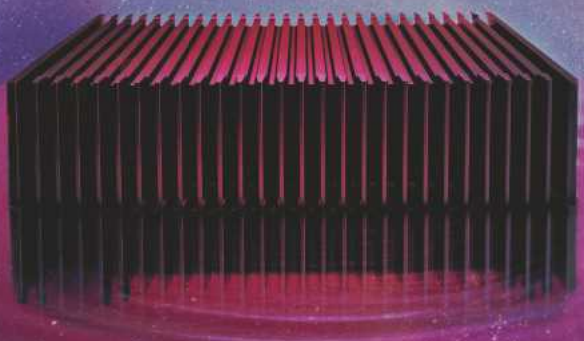
DISLIKE: Not the most full-blooded presentation; lean bass

WE SAY: There are better wireless active systems, but not at this price. An accomplished package and fine value.

nucleus

by

roon



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Hi-Fi Choice RECOMMENDED

Cloud nine

This flagship integrated looks extremely similar to the smaller i7, but ***Ed Selley*** says there's more here than meets the eye

When Cyrus announced the XR Series, you could be forgiven for wondering what the fuss was all about. Beyond a new display and a blacker finish, the components felt very similar to existing models. The listening experience was rather different, though. Back in *HFC* 473, the i7-XR put in a fine showing and now it's the turn of the larger i9-XR.

Four RCA line inputs and a moving-magnet phono stage are fitted, along with a pre and line out. It's joined by a digital board that offers two optical, two coaxial and one USB input. The sample rate handling is excellent, with 768kHz PCM and DSD512 supported via USB while the coaxial connections stretch to 384kHz. With 10 inputs in total, there's not much that you can't connect to the Cyrus, although some may find the omission of Bluetooth an annoyance.

The key difference between the i9 and the smaller amplifier is the power output. This is now 91W into 6ohm, which is a significant improvement over the 52W of the i7.

The power supply is considerably larger in the i9 and feeds the same 'wideband' design as the rest of the XR Series and is designed to present a flat frequency response from the onset of DC through to 100kHz. It's combined with a preamp that's been built around short signal paths and relay input selection.

Some aspects of the i9-XR will likely inspire the same slight frustration as its smaller sibling, however. For starters, the speaker terminals only accept hollow-ended 4mm plugs and they're extremely close together. I'd personally accept a single set of

It's a performance that combines supreme confidence with enormous fun

terminals if it meant that more conventional plugs could be used. The headphone socket is on the rear and, while it can be switched in and out via a button on the front, this is far from ideal if you plan to connect the headphones to anything else.

These annoyances are thrown into sharp relief in part because the rest of the Cyrus is very good indeed. Without any significant changes to the metalwork and overall aesthetics that the company has used for many years, it looks and feels effortlessly more modern than the previous 6 and 8 Series models. The new display in particular is an order of magnitude easier to read than the previous version and the move to touch-panel buttons looks smarter than the older raised alternatives without them being any harder to use. The build quality is good too, with a solid overall feel and excellent finish. The remote control isn't the prettiest going, but it offers scope to control a complete Cyrus system. The i9-XR is more expensive than the i7, but it still manages to feel good value. The prospect of there now being a BluOS-based streamer at some point in the future also adds to its appeal.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Cyrus i9-XR

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
Integrated amplifier

WEIGHT
6.5kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
215 x 73 x 360mm

FEATURES
- Quoted power output: 2x 91W (6ohm)
- Four line inputs via RCA
- Moving-magnet phono stage
- Digital board with: USB; 2x coaxial; 2x optical inputs

DISTRIBUTOR
Cyrus Audio Ltd.

TELEPHONE
01480 410900

WEBSITE
cyrusaudio.com

Sound quality

The 'worth' of the i9-XR is easier to appreciate when you stop poring over the spec and sit down and listen to it. Initially, I employ it in the same manner I tested the i7, with a USB feed from a Roon Nucleus and connected up to a pair of Focal Kanta No1 standmounts (*HFC* 454). The Kanta is not a hard speaker to drive. At no stage in the time I used it with the less powerful i7 did that amp struggle, even when levels were set fairly high. Even allowing for this, however, the i9-XR brings such an effortlessness and authority to the performance that it feels like a profound step forward.

Revisiting the glorious swooping instrumental post rock of God Is An Astronaut's *All Is Violent, All Is Bright* on the i9-XR is illuminating. Without losing any of the traditional speed and fluency for which Cyrus amplifiers are known, the i9-XR handles big transient moments with an authority that feels some way in

advance of its 91W output. This is still not the most vast and spacious sounding device you can buy at this sort of price, but within the space it delivers the performance there is no perceivable congestion. Instruments are presented with a convincing tonal realism and the balance that the i9-XR walks between refinement and excitement – even when used with the Focal speaker, which can be provoked by some electronics – is very impressive indeed.

The true ability of the i9-XR comes when you put the Focal to one side and substitute in the Neat Majstra (*HFC* 486) instead. The Neat is less expensive than the Kanta, but the isobaric design makes it a trickier speaker to drive. The i9-XR grips it in

Without significant changes to the overall look, it feels more modern than before

a way that I've never really seen from a Cyrus integrated before. The result is quite sensational bass as the speed of the integrated combines with the clout of the speaker for a performance that hammers its way through White Lies' *Am I Really Going To Die* with stunning enthusiasm. The digital board might be unchanged from the i7-XR, but it still complements the amplifier stage beautifully. Even when pushing hard with less than pristine recordings, the Cyrus is still a detailed but impressively refined performer.

The phono stage is also a star turn. The extra power of the i9-XR really makes itself felt here because the lower gain of vinyl needs a higher volume level. The i9-XR allows for this with enough spare headroom to ensure that even the hefty live performance of Public Service Broadcasting's *Go!* on their *Live At Brixton* album is delivered without congestion or strain. This is a phono stage that is far more than just a convenience feature. Connected to a Rega Planar 10 (*HFC* 456) mounting a Vertere Sabre moving-magnet cartridge, at no stage does the Cyrus feel like a device that isn't up to the job of doing justice to this seriously capable vinyl front end.

HOW IT COMPARES

Rega's Aethos (*HFC* 457) has undergone a price rise since we reviewed it and is the better out-and-out amplifier. It has more power and a muscularity that even the beefed-up i9-XR cannot easily match. What is notable, however, is how close the Cyrus gets to the Rega. That's significant because anyone shopping for an Aethos will need to budget for digital decoding and the phono stage that are supplied with the Cyrus. If you already own these things, that's less of a consideration, but for those that don't the i9-XR represents outstanding value.

Conclusion

The result is an amplifier that makes more sense the longer you listen to it. Even with speakers that the i7-XR sounds good with, the i9-XR is more capable still and the moment you switch to something harder to drive, the more expensive amplifier starts delivering a performance that combines unflappable confidence with enormous fun. Perhaps the most impressive aspect of what the Cyrus can do is that it is able to rival some equivalently priced designs that are analogue input only, while offering connectivity that they cannot match. This is an outstanding amplifier and one that should win many new converts to the Cyrus brand ●

Connectivity includes 4x RCA line inputs, 2x coaxial and 2x optical digital inputs plus a moving-magnet phono stage

Hi-Fi Choice OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY ★★★★½

FEATURES ★★★★½

LIKE: Outstanding performance; superb spec; build quality

DISLIKE: Poor speaker terminals; headphone socket position

WE SAY: A superb all-rounder that combines flexible spec with an outstanding sonic performance

OVERALL ★★★★★

Hi-Fi Choice RECOMMENDED

Little wonder

As the cost of living spirals out of control, ***Nick Tate*** tries this highly capable, cost-conscious small speaker out for size

Whatever happened to the bargain basement standmount? Back in the mid-Eighties you could buy a pair of Wharfedale Diamonds for £80, while a decade or so later Mission 760s would set you back £130. When you take the relative change in value of money over the years into account, that price now translates to roughly £260 – the cost of the AE100² you see before you.

Designer Mat Spandl alludes to this, noting: "We can't do anything decent below this price point". Put simply, the compromises needed to sell a budget speaker any cheaper than this in 2022 are such that Acoustic Energy wouldn't want to put the company's name to it. And this is, of course, a Chinese-manufactured product, where costs to produce are still lower than in the West.

Forgive all this slide-rule twiddling, but it does illustrate just how tight things are when designing and selling entry-level speakers. This brings me on to the next point – doing a good cheap speaker is way harder than doing a good mid-price or even high-end one. This is because, with a budget box, every last penny has to be counted, and indeed pinched.

If you're a designer creating a £2,600 standmount, you don't have to justify every last 'dollar and cent' spent in the finished product, and a £26,000 speaker designer can splurge money around with gay abandon. Yet here, everything has to be as good as it possibly can – because everything counts in small amounts!

One key design aim for the AE100² was to make it reasonably sensitive, and the quoted 87dB shows that this has just about been achieved. The 130mm paper coned mid/bass unit is as large as can be crammed into a speaker that's just 165mm wide; many rivals use 110mm units, which are less efficient and less good at handling power. Paper isn't particularly fashionable as a cone material, but a speaker designer of great experience whom I know and trust – not connected to Acoustic Energy – told me it's still a great material for a drive unit cone, being light, stiff and natural sounding.

High frequencies are dispensed by a 25mm fabric dome tweeter. Although Acoustic Energy is famous for its metal and – more recently – carbon dome high-frequency units, fabric is a fine compromise. Potentially such a tweeter can sound very smooth, and mates nicely, tonally, with paper mid/bass drivers. The crossover does its stuff at 2.9kHz.

The cabinet features AE's favoured rear-firing slot-shaped bass reflex port; all the company's speakers now use this and it makes its presence felt less than conventional round ports and you can push it closer to a boundary without issue. The cabinet is 15mm high-density fibreboard; HDF is more expensive than the MDF used by most speaker makers, but due to its greater rigidity, Acoustic Energy has used less of it. Like every speaker cabinet in the world, it produces its own colourations, but Mat Spandl's view is that they're quite euphonic and agreeable ones all the same.

The end result is a small, ported two-way design with a claimed frequency response of 51Hz to 26kHz (-3dB) and 120W RMS power handling. By the standards of the aforementioned budget boxes of the Eighties and Nineties, these are quite staggering numbers – and show how far speaker design has progressed, at least on paper. The cabinet also looks very neat, especially in its satin white finish; satin black and walnut vinyl wrap are also available. In the flesh, it feels markedly swisher than those golden oldies too, with the magnetically attached grilles adding to the sense of sophistication.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Acoustic Energy AE100²

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
Two-way standmount loudspeaker

WEIGHT
4.6kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
165 x 290 x 250mm

FEATURES
- 25mm dome tweeter
- 130mm mid/bass driver
- Quoted sensitivity: 87dB/1W/1m (6ohm)

DISTRIBUTOR
Acoustic Energy

TELEPHONE
01285 654432

WEBSITE
acoustic-energy.co.uk

Even with the volume really wound up, it holds on tight and doesn't lose the plot

Sound quality

The AE100² is a slinky low-budget design that sounds surprisingly suave. First, let's remind ourselves that no speaker at this price point is anywhere near perfect. Rather, the trick is too minimise what it gets wrong – because in absolute terms it's never going to be accurate and/or neutral. And that's the strength of this little mini-monitor – it hides its limitations in a really self-effacing way.

Put it on the end of a half decent system – I use a Chord Hugo 2 (*HFC*

488) DAC feeding an Exposure 3510 integrated, with a variety of digital sources – and it sings. It's lots of fun, yet totally inoffensive – so it doesn't scream, squawk or boom at you. This in turn lets you enjoy music more than with most bargain-basement standmounts. It's way less detailed and open than, say, Acoustic Energy's own mid-price AE500 (*HFC* 465), yet is a quarter of the price without being just 25 percent of the fun…

Cue up some classic rock in the shape of Peter Gabriel's *Solsbury Hill*, and you're treated to a jaunty few minutes of foot tapping, plus the chance of some fist waving as you really get wrapped up in the tune. It's a fabulous piece of music, of course, and the AE100² shows why. Rhythmically it's surprisingly good for a budget box, and the recording comes over as relatively uncompressed. Even on the song's crescendo at the end, with the volume control really wound up, this wee speaker holds on tight and doesn't lose the plot.

This proves to be a great portent of things to come, because whatever programme material I try during my reviewing, it doesn't get in the way of enjoying the music; quite the opposite. In absolute terms, the AE100² is tonally a tad soft and opaque; you get nowhere near the insight that you would from a considerably more expensive design. Yet this doesn't seem to hold it back in any way, as it has a compelling rhythmic quality that maintains your interest no matter what.

HOW IT COMPARES

In the great scheme of cheap speaker things, Q Acoustics 3020i (*HFC* 441) sits very close to the AE100². It's almost the same size and weight, has similar measured performance and price. Even the styling isn't that different. Sonically they're not poles apart either, but the 3020i presents itself in a softer and soggier way. It doesn't quite have the snap and punch of the AE100². The result is that the Q seems just a touch too middle of the road, even if it is still a fine design at the price – especially if you're running a forward sounding system.

Walnut (below) and satin white or black (left) are you colour options here

I love the way the bassline bounces around to the strains of Elvis Costello's *Pump It Up*; the AE100² doing precisely that. It thumps out a good amount of low frequencies considering its diminutive dimensions and really pushes hard on musical climaxes. The result is a big, bouncy bass guitar groove that drives this classic new-wave song along. Further up in the midband, Costello's slightly acerbic, shouty voice is carried more smoothly than expected, with some of its hardness taken away. Up top, cymbal work is a little veiled, but still crisp enough to sound realistic and satisfying – after all, the last thing you want is for your budget speaker to sound bright.

Stereo imaging is about as good as it has a right to be; it's far from perfect in absolute terms, but decently wide and nicely 'out of the box'. Indeed the spacious tech of Kraftwerk's *Spacelab* is very well carried, really pushing out far into the room, left and right. Depth perspective isn't amazing, but it's a baby speaker that's cheaper than what many spend on speaker cables! Within the soundstage, things are reasonably well laid out, but we're not in the same league of pinpoint precision as a high-end electrostatic.

Overall then, the outstanding thing about the AE100² is that it suffers from none of the usual cheap speaker nasties. Of course, it's a real come down from any good £1,000-plus standmount, yet somehow it doesn't seem to matter – such is its charm. Within seconds of cueing up a track, the listener is happily getting into the music's mood – and you can't say much fairer than that.

Conclusion

Acoustic Energy's AE100² is hard not to like. It has a friendly, warm, inviting and affable character that doesn't bother you with too much detail about the recording, but instead gets you into the music itself. You might even say it has a certain charm of its very own. As such, it's a highly impressive thing at this price – and hard not to recommend with open arms. With cleverly designed budget loudspeakers, less can be so much more, it seems ●

HiFi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY ★★★★☆

EASE OF DRIVE ★★★★☆

LIKE: Rhythm; tonality; sonic charm

DISLIKE: Nothing at the price

WE SAY: Cheap and cheerful fun

OVERALL ★★★★★

Hi-Fi Choice EDITOR'S CHOICE

Pocket power!

Astell&Kern calls its second-gen SR25 DAP a pocket powerhouse. An initially sceptical ***David Vivian*** is inclined to agree

When I reviewed the original A&norma SR25 (*HFC* 465), I couldn't name a single thing that needed improving, let alone fixing. I ended the review with the thought that, at a reasonable £650, A&K's entry-level model was probably as much quality portable digital audio player anyone would ever need.

My mind hasn't changed, but the SR25 has. Now available in MKII guise, Astell&Kern talks of "improvements all round, making the best even better".

The most obvious change is the inclusion of a 4.4mm, 5-pole balanced output to sit alongside the existing 2.5mm, 4-pole balanced output, making the MKII compatible with just about everything in the high-end head-fi arena. Naturally, a regular 3.5mm jack is here, too. Aesthetically, the distinctive and comfortable-to-hold form factor hasn't changed, but the aluminium chassis is now Mercury Dark Silver rather than the lighter Moon Silver of the original. The watch-winder volume wheel on the side has a more defined 'soft click' action that feels decidedly upmarket.

Other new arrivals include the ReplayGain auto gain setting, which allows the player to adjust the volume between tracks and maintain a consistent playback level. As well as hooking up with DLNA servers and wi-fi networks, the SR25 MKII can also function as a Bluetooth DAC for your smartphone or a USB DAC for a Mac or Windows-based PC. The twin Cirrus Logic 43198 MasterClass DACs are carried over from before in dual-mono configuration giving support for native playback of DSD256 and 32-bit/384KHz PCM files. Full MQA support is provided and unfolds all the way to the original resolution of the file and that includes Tidal Master offerings. Bluetooth streaming in 24-bit is available to devices that support the LDAC and aptX HD codecs.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Astell&Kern A&norma SR25 MKII

ORIGIN
South Korea

TYPE
Portable hi-res digital audio player

WEIGHT
178g

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
64 x 108 x 16mm

FEATURES
- Supports: WAV; FLAC; WMA; MP3; OGG; APE; AAC; ALAC; AIFF; DFF; DSF; MQA
- Storage: 64GB internal plus micro SD (up to 1TB)

DISTRIBUTOR
Armour Home Electronic Ltd.

TELEPHONE
0208 2008282

WEBSITE
astellkern.co.uk

As before, the touchscreen is driven by a quad-core CPU and the latest Android OS. Navigation is simple and intuitive, scrolling exceptionally smooth and the 'A' logo takes you straight to the home screen. Internal memory runs to 64GB with support for microSD cards up to 1TB. Claimed battery remains a generous 20 hours.

Sound quality

Using the same DAC as its predecessor, it would be surprising if the MKII sounded substantially different and I'm inclined to conclude it doesn't. At least not in core character, and that's no bad thing. Before listening to the original SR25, I hadn't encountered a DAP with the talent to tame a bright and spiky recording while retaining its energy and drive. I loved the way the fast and furious but usually sharp and aggressive-sounding *Lipstick Vogue* from Elvis Costello And The Attractions became a much more sophisticated proposition as rendered by the SR25 in 24/192: still more potent and hard hitting yet also richer, smoother and easier to listen to. Using the same Meze 99 Classic (*HFC* 410) headphones as before but with *Lipstick Vogue* streamed as a Tidal Master on the MKII in unfolded MQA, the track is all but unrecognisable with a much truer sense of tonal texture and body, a more focused yet airier soundstage with better resolved acoustic ambience and tauter, deeper bass – any hint of brittleness eradicated.

Conclusion

Sonically, the MKII is slightly more transparent than the MKI with nuanced improvements in tonal colour and texture, high-frequency air and smoothness, body and bass. Unless you really need the MKII's enhanced functionality, probably not enough to entice existing SR25 owners to upgrade. I'm inclined to say it's the only DAP you'll ever need, but then A&K probably has other ideas ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★
FEATURES ★★★★★

LIKE: Superb sound, design and build; features

DISLIKE: Nothing of any real note

WE SAY: The quality almost glows. As good as it gets for the money

OVERALL ★★★★★

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Spin doctor

Nick Tate samples Sony's long-lost CDP-X77ES flagship silver disc spinner

Launched in October 1989 in Japan, shipments of Sony's CDP-X77ES to foreign countries didn't really get in gear until early the year after. Despite being basically a big black (or gold, in some markets) brick, it was bleeding-edge modern in one very important respect. It used a one-bit Pulse DAC (Bitstream, as Philips called the technology) rather than a noisier multi-bit design. Suffice to say it seemed achingly modern.

Being Japanese, it was terminally unfashionable in the UK. Very few British magazines touched it and when I went into my hi-fi dealer, clutching £1,200 about to buy my first serious CD player, I wasn't even aware of its existence. Yet after hearing The Beloved's *The Sun Rising* on it, there was no turning back. The Sony broke every rule that British audiophiles had learned about hi-fi in the eighties. If it's big, heavy, shiny and slick to use – we had been told – it's probably rubbish because none of the machine's budget has been spent where it matters. The CDP-X77ES wasn't just heavy, shiny and slick, its case went back far further than any other CD player I'd seen.

This wasn't some idle styling, it was due to the fact that analogue and digital stages were kept separate in different compartments divided up by copper walls. Further copper shielding was all over the inside of the machine, and it had separate

History lesson

1982

Sony & Philips launch CD as The Clash's Joe Strummer vanishes, forcing the band to postpone their UK tour

1984

Sony unveils its high-end player, the CDP-502ES as Marvin Gaye is shot and killed during an argument with his father

1989

Sony launches the CDP-X77ES as James Brown is sentenced to six years in jail after a police chase through two different states

1990

Sony opts to discontinue the CDP-X77ES as Curtis Mayfield is paralysed from the neck down in an accident at an outdoor concert

analogue and digital power transformers too.

Its action is super-fast yet butter-smooth and the transport – using a KSS-280A laser and diecast aluminium BU-1 base – reads the disc in an instant. Indeed the track access speeds remind you it was first among equals in the late Eighties race to be the fastest mechanism in the world.

Cutting edge

The machine uses Sony's (then) cutting-edge CXD-2552 DAC (two of them actually, running at 50MHz), and an 8fs, 45-bit CXD-1244 digital filter. Sony called this its High Density Linear Converter (HDLC), it uses Pulse Length Modulation to convert the digits to the analogue domain. The complex LSI chip has a third-order noise shaper, and gives an oversampling rate of 64x. A third-order, high-pass analogue output filter finishes things off.

Contemporary reviews praised its excellent technical performance, which was well and truly state of the art for the time. Sony claimed a frequency response of 2Hz–20kHz ±0.3dB, and a THD figure of 0.0015 percent. Signal-to-noise ratio was 117dB (A-weighted), better than that of CD itself. Contemporary multi-bit machines had noticeably inferior noise levels, especially at high frequencies.

The most useful of its features is Custom File, which remembers your favourite tracks on every CD – providing you take the trouble to programme them in. Missing in action is the remote controlled variable line/headphone level control, as fitted to Sony's X55ES and X33ES. The company said that it couldn't get a sufficiently fine-sounding motorised potentiometer for this application, so opted to include a very high-quality conventional one.

The Eighties was, of course, dominated by CD players with multi-bit DACs, and they got progressively better. Yet they were always a little noisy when resolving high treble, and many believed this is what contributed to the edgy sound of early digital audio. The one-bit 'Pulse' DAC used on the CDP-X77ES certainly presents a different sound to that which many CD fans were used to. Indeed it's quite unique sounding even now – and surprisingly strong by modern standards.

Feed this big Sony with a complex rock recording like Rush's *The Camera Eye*, and you'll be amazed with its sheer resolution. It digs really deep into the mix to scavenge vast amounts of detail, all set in a very strong and well-ordered soundstage. Yet despite this, the player is actually a lot of fun to listen to – so it's not just a forensic, cerebral sound. At the same time, despite all this detail and incision, it has an ever so slightly soft sound. Tonally it's very smooth with an almost complete lack of glare. For 1990, that was a revelation.

The CDP-X77ES' bass sounded more gutsy and better defined than its rivals

I bought my Sony CDP-X77ES after taking the time to listen to all the competition. Being an analogue addict, I'd been wary of digital audio and wanted a smooth but revealing sound – which is exactly what the Sony gave. I was amazed that all its British rivals, which if you believed many of their reviews were the ones to go for, didn't match the new Sony in this respect. Having also heard a slightly earlier late-Eighties Sony flagship, the harsh, edge-of-your-seat sounding CDP-559ES, I couldn't believe they were from the same country of manufacture, let alone the same brand!

The absence of visual clutter meant the X77ES ended up with a very simple, plain fascia

BUYING ADVICE

The physical condition of the machine is a good general guide; if the unit has been battered, the transport buttons show signs of wear or the display isn't very bright it's likely to have clocked up lots of use. This is bad because a replacement optical pick-up assembly is hard to find. Laser pick-up heads are like LEDs: they last a long time, but drop in intensity as they age. When this happens, the machine increases the power to maintain the laser light output level, thus wearing the laser out even faster. So if any machine doesn't have lightning-fast disc access or shows any sign of skipping (disc read errors), it should be avoided. Really good, low mileage examples go for £600 or so, and are a bargain – both for their sound and the quality of their CD transport, which is sublime. Go for one of these and hope to use it for a good few years to come, or take a punt on a grimy example for half that and enjoy it while it lasts!

Low rider

The other beauty of the X77ES was its bass. It was noticeably stronger than any of its rivals; it seemed to sound more gutsy and better defined. I even noticed this when using this machine as a transport – it appeared to make DACs sound better than other transports and lent them a strong and tuneful bottom end. I can't explain why, but suffice to say this is one of the best-sounding CD transports I've ever heard. Feeding a modern Chord Hugo TT2 DAC, it's a real treat. The Chord DAC is easily more detailed and better delineated than the Sony's three decade-old built-in design. Yet the Sony has a warm, smooth charm than the more matter-of-fact Chord can't quite match.

This is a beautiful silver disc spinner from the golden age of Compact Disc players. You might say it was designed and built right at the high watermark of CD, when it was (aside from Digital Audio Tape), the only digital game in town and everyone aspired to buying the best if and when they could afford it. It offers most of what the truly exotic machines with telephone number price tags did, but for far less money with absolutely no corners cut. A sort of CD player equivalent of an E39 BMW M5, it's still a cracking machine even now some 33 years later ●

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THIS MONTH

ED SELLEY

EXPERTISE: REVIEWER
Active in the industry since 1999, Ed's first record was *Boss Drum* by The Shamen. He splits his time between reviewing and protecting hi-fi kit from his son Will.

NEVILLE ROBERTS

EXPERTISE: ENGINEER
Neville has an eclectic taste for classical baroque and jazz. His wife was forced to marry his transmission line speakers in the eighties and he collects BBC test card music.

JASON KENNEDY

EXPERTISE: REVIEWER
Editor of *HFC* from 1998 to 2001, Jason's first turntable was Rega's Planar 3 and Elvis' *40 Greatest Hits* was his first vinyl, so don't go stepping on his blue suede shoes.

DAVID PRICE

EXPERTISE: REVIEWER
DP two-finger typed his first hi-fi review 25 years ago. Since then he's edited *Hi-Fi World* and *HFC*. He describes himself as an "unreconstructed analogue addict".

CHRIS WARD

EXPERTISE: REVIEWER
Like his first kiss, Chris will never forget the sound of his first amp – an Aura Evolution VA-100. *War Of The Worlds* and Fleetwood Mac's *Rumours* were his first records.

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Animal magnetism

I recently caught up with a buddy who also loves music and hi-fi down the pub and we got chatting about adjustments we had made to our setups. He has removed the spikes from his floorstanders and replaced them with IsoAcoustics Gaia isolators. He said he was mighty impressed with the results and was able to try them out in advance of purchase.

This got me thinking about doing something similar... I have Audio Physic floorstanders and I was unaware they have their own new isolators, to replace spikes. These VCF II Magnetic Plus isolators float my speakers on a magnetic air cushion. Man, what a difference; it just tightens every area of the sound quality. These babies are easy to install, compact and very neat. Like the Gaia's there are size and weight isolation units to suit. There is a very slight wobble in situ, but the magnetic grip soon arrests this. I would suggest that any speaker without isolation should benefit from this excellent German engineering.

Ash Trafford, by email

JK: Great to hear that speaker isolation is becoming more popular Ash. I've been banging on about this for over a decade now and can't overstate the benefits it brings to nearly all speakers – those with downward-firing drivers being the only ones that should avoid it.

CW: Our dearly departed friend Max Townshend would salute you for ratifying his brilliant discoveries. All music is a vibration: a vibration of an instrument or voice is progressively morphed into a vibration of the air by a loudspeaker that we perceive as sound. Along that long signal transmission journey, by far the greatest departure from absolute fidelity takes place in loudspeakers. This isn't a criticism, it's just the nature of the ambitious physics asked of drivers, panels, domes and cones. By attempting to isolate a speaker from the ground you are hopefully diminishing a set of resonances that can bounce back from the floor and build within your loudspeaker. Max also argued that there are also plenty of ground-borne vibrations that make their way upward into your system and loudspeakers, shaking them from accuracy. Spikes can be used to reduce the grounding with the floor, but conversely can also join a speaker with softer floorboards. The heart of this debate is whether you try and banish unwanted energy forming or whether you try to sink that energy away as fast as possible.

Audio Physic's isolators use magnets to 'float' the speakers

Spot the difference

I am considering buying the Ruark R3 that was featured back in *HFC* 469 as I am interested in finally taking the plunge into the world of hi-res. However I have also seen that there is a Ruark R5. Is it worth the extra cost or am I better sticking to the R3? I do not have an internet connection, would this be a problem?

Timothy Harvey, Manchester

JK: Both are excellent units but both are designed for use with wi-fi and thus require internet access. If you don't have this you would be better off looking for a good-quality DAB/FM/CD source-based design, which are something of a dying breed. I have a Ruark R4i, which is a predecessor of the R3 and R5 and would suit your ▶

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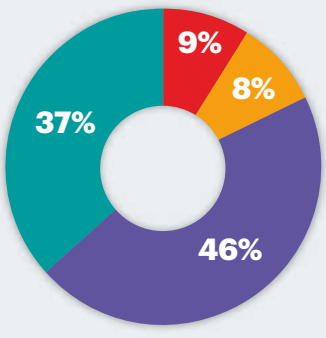

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Bluesound's Pulse 2i might be a better hi-res fit for Timothy

needs. I suggest looking for a good used example of this or a similar unit.

ES: I've not tested the R5 but it seems to have the same basic 'front end' as the R3 ,which I have tested and rather like. I would say, though, that Ruark's hi-res support is somewhat patchy (it varies from format to format as to what sample rate it supports, which isn't ideal). It isn't as attractive (and has no CD player), but Bluesound's Pulse 2i (*HFC* 456) is a more capable means of accessing and enjoying hi-res content. I'm also not completely clear where your hi-res will come from without an internet connection. Whether you are using on-demand streaming or buying downloads, an internet connection is vital for accessing hi-res content.

The mains man

I have been considering buying a mains conditioner. However, I am unsure as to what it is they do and how they affect overall performance. Consequently I have some questions: are wi-fi signal and sound quality improved? Are conditioners costly and does the cost add up to an equal improvement in sound quality? Do they take up a lot of space? How easy are they to set up? I am grateful for any help you can provide.

JP Kendall, Wakefield

DP: AC mains comes into our houses along with a smallish amount of noise or distortion. External noise gets onto the AC mains supply due to everything from fridges to TVs. All of this creates a hostile environment for our sensitive hi-fis that amplify and transduce low-voltage signals. Needless to say, it tends to be worse in cities and/or crowded environments.

Mains conditioners either filter this noise passively or actively as part of a regenerator, which literally reconstructs the waveform of the mains and feeds it out to you at exactly 230V regardless of what's coming into your house – as well as removing almost all the noise. The latter type, such as IsoTek's EVO3 Genesis, for example, is expensive but produces a noticeable and consistent result. It reduces the distortion by a factor of ten and gets the voltage bang on. The result is a smoother sound, with more low-level detail and clarity, as well as less tonal harshness. The former type can be very effective, but results tend to vary a bit more from system to system. Overall it's well worth spending money on a mains conditioner if you have a mid-price-to-high-end system, but don't spend

An internet hook-up is vital for getting hi-res downloads or music streaming

more than around ten percent of your total system budget on one.

JK: Mains conditioners won't effect a wi-fi signal but will stop the noise produced by switching power supplies, usually found on wi-fi devices, from getting to your audio electronics. Costs vary significantly as does space taken up, but some are a simple multi-outlet extension such as the Atlas Eos Modular 2.5 (£395) while others are as big as a CD player of which the Puritan Audio Labs PSM136 (£995) is a good value example.

CW: This is a relatively controversial field. My own personal preference is ▶

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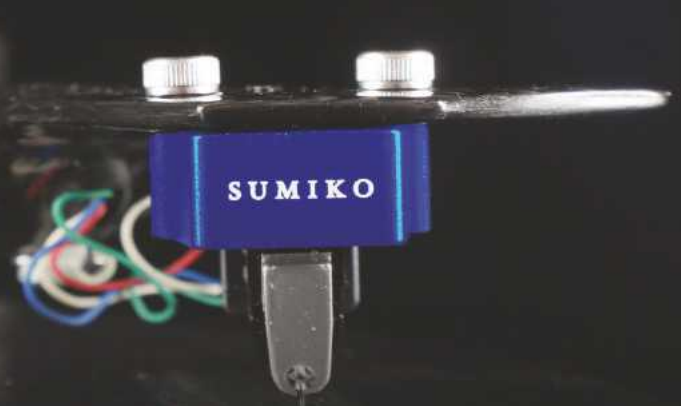

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Neville swears by (not at) his Russ Andrews PowerPurifier

not to muck about too much with my lovely, lively mains. That said I know many audiophiles absolutely plagued with huge swings in voltages or noisy mains from nearby industrial units or rural wires being bashed by trees in the wind. I have experimented with some repurposed BT mains conditioners and filters for CD players or phono stages, but the results are mixed. Conditioners can be considered to be trying to smooth any lumps or 'hairiness' from your mains sine wave, but given that a musical signal is full of ultra fast transients I often hear conditioners create a smoother sound but somehow are more boring and less present, especially with live tracks. As DP says, an alternative and far more expensive route is to invest in a mains 'regenerator'. This is akin to you buying your own substation to ensure nobody else is corrupting your own personal mains, but these are often a considerable investment. They are good, but you need to weigh up this sort of investment versus improved sources and amplification.

Mains conditioners stop rogue electrical noise from getting into your system

NR: In my opinion, investment in some good mains conditioning is essential for any serious audio enthusiast. However, the answer to your question of whether the cost adds up to: "an equal improvement in sound quality" is going to be entirely subjective and very much up to the individual. I personally would not be without my fully populated Russ Andrews PowerPurifier (*HFC* 425) which does a pretty thorough job of cleaning everything up and certainly results in significant sonic improvements. Furthermore, its modular design means you can populate it with various conditioners in stages as funds allow. Finally, mains conditioners usually take no setting up at all and are just plugged in – either in parallel or in series with your equipment.

What's your angle?

I read both turntable *Group Tests* in the July 2021 and September 2020 issues and really enjoyed them. There are a couple of places here in the States and Canada – Analog Magik and Wally Tools – that offer the knowledge and wisdom for setting up a turntable for optimum playback performance. It is common knowledge now that the best compromise for setting the stylus rake angle is 92°. To do this one would need to use a USB microscope to be able to see the stylus angle and correct it to 92° as needed. Another important factor is azimuth: a test record and volt meter can be employed here to carry out this measurement.

At wally tools.com, under the 'wally school' section, it reveals that it has tested the angle of many expensive carts and found the stylus is off centre by as much as 5°. I wonder how many other turntable manufacturers are guilty of selling equipment purporting to be properly setup that quite clearly isn't?

Richard Fraser, USA

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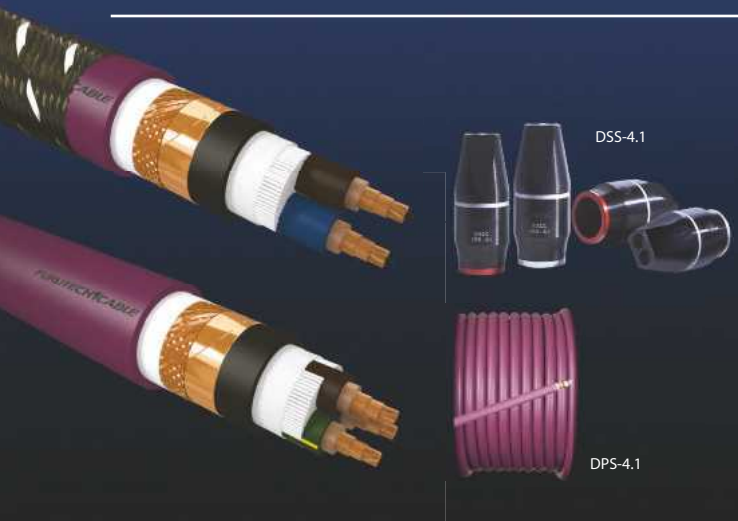

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There are tools for setting azimuth, but some prefer to do it by ear

ES: In my experience Richard, cartridges have a 'worst of both worlds' element to their construction in that they are complex and require great precision, but tend to be made in relatively small amounts – often with an 'artisanal' element to that production process. The apocryphal stories of 'good ones and bad ones' does seem to follow some companies around more than others, but I feel obliged to point out that the unit-to-unit consistency of a number of different carts that have passed through testing here has been uniformly good.

For turntables themselves, their unit-to-unit consistency should be slim to the point of nonexistence. Even relatively affordable devices from Pro-Ject and Rega have exhibited absolute consistency on the occasions that more than one of something has been tested and, while it is less common for me to see multiple examples of more expensive turntables, I don't recall the last time I had something here that didn't largely meet or exceed the numbers it is supposed to do.

The angle of the stylus in the groove has a major impact on the sound quality

JK: There is another approach to cartridge alignment and it's one that's been around for a lot longer than precision measurement equipment, namely ears. While it's nice to have the reassurance that a turntable has been professionally setup, we are all able to fine tune things like stylus rake angle and if the arm allows it azimuth by trial and error. Make small changes to downforce, arm height and anti-skate settings and listen to the results. You will be pleasantly surprised how easy it is to hear the differences.

NR: Sadly, I think it is quite commonplace that record decks are sold that have not been properly setup. Setting the azimuth simply involves ensuring the stylus is perpendicular to the record when the cartridge is viewed from the front. Unfortunately, there are some people who don't believe that VTA, or more correctly SRA, is particularly important. The VTA is the angle of the cantilever to the record surface (usually around 20°), which in itself is not that critical. However, the SRA, which is the angle of the stylus in the groove, is very important and has a major impact on sound quality. The closer the SRA can be adjusted to match that of the original cutter head, the better, and your figure of 92° would be about right. However, I prefer to set the SRA by ear – if the arm is set too high, the sound will be harsh and thin with poor imaging. If set too low, the sound will be dull with 'boomy' bass, lacking detail and again with poor imaging. The correct point is unmistakable where the instruments and vocals snap into focus and everything sounds clear.

LETTER OF THE MONTH

Money saver

Great sentiment about making the most of your money in the *Letters* section of the April issue. Have you ever done a 'review' of using domestic mains cables as loudspeaker connections? As well as various manufacturers' 1.5mm and 2.5mm *etc.* there's also huge cooker cables (10mm?) which good electrical trade outlets sell by the metre; who knows they may even be significantly better

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than the megabucks cables? Plus, on an equally thrifty tack, how about putting a 75ohm resistor in a phono connector across all unused digital coaxial outputs to prevent them (electrically) ringing? Or where it's essential that speaker cables have to run alongside power cables, put them in foam pipe isolation to keep them spaced from the potentially interfering high volts? My favourite tip is to get a piece of felt and cut small pieces to place under each equipment foot to help reduce vibrations into the equipment, total cost less than a quid. In my student days, decades ago, my Dual CS505/AT95E sat on a paving slab, it worked well.

Dave Beverhausen, by email

CW: A lovely set of thrifty ideas Dave. I'm often a fan of budget solutions as they force one to properly consider the physics in play. The use of higher mass and absorption materials is always smart to explore. Your felt patches sound quite subtle, I'd encourage you to push the idea further. Cutting squash balls in half and placing them under components is a great cheap experiment. I'm less sure about the cheap mains cable or cooker cable, as my experience suggests that there is something about the dialectic that surrounds conductors that makes a significant difference to signal purity. Cooker cable has lots of copper to handle higher currents, but I doubt you'll generate high currents with your hi-fi. Sometimes an excess of a conductor can appear counter-productive, somehow conveying some frequencies on the surface of the cable where others frequencies can sound disjointed and flabby. Furthermore, the termination connectors that you may attach to any such beefy cabling can represent a very marked material boundary that affects the signal where it matters most. My own personal insights around tidying cabling uses sticky backed cable conduits that one might run along skirting boards. The key insight is to avoid running mains power parallel to signals. Instead, try and cross signal cables at 90°. This reduces mains interference on delicate music signals.

Cut tennis balls into halves and put them under separates for better isolation

JK: There are a great many tweaks that you can make yourself and a good few of them have been mentioned in these pages over the years. Whether twin and earth cables would work well as a speaker connection is hard to say, but given the cost an easy experiment to do. That said, they are solid core rather than multicore so that may not suit all amplifiers. I recall a tweak similar to your felt one which involved gluing felt either side of a two-pence piece to use between spikes and a rack, glass rack shelves in particular have a distinct tendency to ring and these seemed to help.

DP: Setup plays a big part in the overall sound of your system. It's like having a nice car that you run on poor tyres, at the wrong pressures, with the tracking out – the driving experience is totally spoilt, for just a fraction of the car's purchase price. It's the same with hi-fi, poor setup can spoil performance.

Here's my quick guide. Get all your equipment level, placed on coffee tables or dedicated stands. Don't put it near the speakers. Run clean lengths of cable – not intertwined with one another like spaghetti. Clean all electrical contacts, either with isopropyl alcohol, Kontak or Caig DeOxit. Isolate your components on their supports with Foculpod sorbothane feet, or cut up tennis balls into two halves and put them under your separates. Just doing this should noticeably improve your sound.

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Cover story

Album artwork can be as much a part of a record as the music itself, but when did it all start? ***Neville Roberts*** explores how LP sleeves have evolved over the decades

For many, the process of taking a vinyl record out of its sleeve is a vital part of the pleasure of playing records. The name 'album' dated back to before World War II and literally referred to a book that held a set of drab heavy paper sleeves used for holding 10in or 12in shellac records. You might call it the musical equivalent of a photo album. The first-known album was produced by the German record company Odeon in 1909 when it released the *Nutcracker Suite* by Tchaikovsky on four double-sided discs, but the practice was not taken up by record companies for many years.

In the Twenties, bound collections of empty sleeves with a plain paperboard or leather cover were sold as 'record albums' (alongside photograph albums) to offer a safer way of storing vinyl. The bound books could be placed on a shelf upright like a book. Separating the individual discs rather than simply stacking them on top of each other reduced any risk of damage. A piece of classical music required several 78rpm discs to hold the complete work, so a collector would have to purchase an album of discs to own a complete symphony.

Back in the era of the 78 shellac record, all records were sold in generic paper sleeves. Paper was quite adequate for storing a 78 as the record was made from tough stuff, enabling it to withstand the rigours of being played with a steel needle. A shellac resin with a filler comprising clay, slate and limestone was used, together with carbon black for colour and cotton fibres for added strength. The brown paper sleeves were sometimes plain and sometimes printed to show the producer or the retailer's name. The sleeves also often had a central cut-out allowing the record label to be seen.

The acid paper used damaged the vinyl so folded-over card became the norm

In 1938, Columbia Records hired its first Art Director, Alex Steinweiss, who is credited with inventing the concept of cover art. Of particular note was the huge success in the US of a four-record Capitol Records album The King Cole Trio featuring Nat King Cole. Much of this success was attributed to the album artwork of a lively abstract image of a double bass, a guitar and a piano keyboard under a gold crown. Other record companies followed suit and by the late Forties record albums for all the major companies sported their own colourful covers.

When vinyl records started to appear in the Forties, it was soon found that paper was not protective enough. The acid paper used for 78s damaged the grooves and record companies started using a folded-over cardboard sleeve instead.

After the Second World War, Blue Note had some very talented designers working for it to illustrate many of the now famous covers for artists such as Dizzy Gillespie and Thelonious Monk. Blue Note's co-owner, Francis Wolff, had amassed a collection of photographs of musicians both playing music and relaxing off stage. These were used in their album's artwork and helped to establish the label's instantly recognisable identity.

No words required

Another landmark occurred in 1956 when Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong, together with the Oscar Peterson Quartet, released *Ella And Louis*. The cover was just a photograph of the pair taken by *Vogue* photographer Phil Stern. They were so famous by then that they didn't even have their names printed on the front. The technique of featuring photographs of the performers certainly played a major part in some of the great Sixties and Seventies covers, such as the instantly recognisable image of The Beatles walking across a pedestrian crossing on their 1969 *Abbey Road* album.

As a further development of the concept, the gatefold cover was produced in the mid-Sixties. This is a double cover that is the same size as a standard LP cover when folded. Gatefold covers, together with lyric sheets made the album cover a desirable work in its own right.

Somehow, the album booklet enclosed with a CD and the PDF accompanying digital downloads don't quite have the same appeal of a 12in square LP album cover, which may partly account for the great vinyl revival ●

"We miss brown paper sleeves!" says no one

NEVILLE ROBERTS
Duck and cover

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Planet airwaves

Nigel Williamson explains how our listening tastes have globalised and celebrates the discovery of a whole new world of sound

When I was first discovering music as a teenager in the late Sixties, rock and pop was a purely Anglo-American phenomenon. Or at least, so we thought. Britain had The Beatles and Stones. America had Dylan and The Beach Boys. Nowhere else was on the map. By the early Seventies, there were a few German bands like Can and Kraftwerk. There was a Dutch group called Focus whose singer did a funny yodelling thing and John Peel raved about a Danish band called Burning Red Ivanhoe, who were never heard from again.

But they were the exceptions that proved the rule and they mostly sang in English, anyway. Popular culture was something Britain and America exported to the rest of the world, which we condescendingly pitied for not having any decent music of its own. The Beatles got their MBEs for their contribution to Britain's balance of payments rather than for their services to music.

Ravi Shankar was good for a bit of exotica via his friendship with George Harrison and Nigeria's Fela Kuti was interesting, because he made a record with Cream's Ginger Baker. The dance music of Argentina (tango) and Cuba (cha-cha-cha) was only heard in bowdlerised, ballroom form on *Come Dancing* and regarded as a joke. Jamaican ska and reggae was viewed with disdain as music that only skinheads liked. Looking back, I cringe at my youthfully ignorant cultural imperialism.

We pitied the rest of the world for not having any decent music of its own

Things began to change a little in the mid-Seventies with the emergence of Bob Marley. But he had lived in Miami and was basically influenced by American R&B to which he added a scratchy beat.

By the Eighties for many of us western pop had begun to lose its allure, and we began to look further afield for records that stimulated and challenged our imagination. If you looked hard you'd have found that there were records by Bulgarian choirs, Congolese singers and Cuban dance bands that offered something more enticing than Anglo-American synth-pop. Then Paul Simon chipped in by recording with South African musicians on *Graceland*. A world of samba, soukous and salsa was opening up, although not in Our Price, HMV or Virgin.

My friend Gerald Seligman, who founded EMI's world music imprint Hemisphere, puts it well. Western pop had become: "something known, comfortable, safe". By contrast, "the world music scene was about getting lost". Gerald was one of a small group of industry professionals who 35 years ago got together one night in 1987 in a room above a North London pub to discuss how to promote these unfamiliar but exciting new sounds. They came up with the term 'world music' and although it was an imperfect description that covered a vast range of different styles and genres, it served its purpose.

Angélique Kidjo will be appearing at Glastonbury later this year

Suddenly, world music became a 'thing', with its own specialist labels, publications, festivals, radio shows and its own section in record stores. At the same time, a plethora of crate-digging archive releases revealed that, although we never got to hear it at the time, great pop and rock music was being made around the world from Ethiopia to Ecuador throughout the Sixties and Seventies.

Global sounds

The music scene in 2022 is more global, cosmopolitan and open minded than ever. The description 'world music' is heard less frequently and there is no longer an automatic assumption that all the best music comes from the UK or US and no self-respecting festival is complete without a decent spread of non-English language acts. This year's Glasto line up, for example, includes Nigerian sensation Burna Boy, Benin's Angélique Kidjo and Seun Kuti & Egypt 80 among others.

Magazines like *Uncut* and *Mojo* now devote pages and pages to albums by artists from corners of the globe they once ignored. Meanwhile, western rock acts from Damon Albarn to Vampire Weekend incorporate sounds from around the planet into their music.

Of course, we have to try to ensure that in the rush to embrace this new, all-encompassing global fusion we don't lose sight of what is truly unique and valuable in our different cultures. But that popular music is now more multicultural than it has ever been has to be a cause for global celebration ●

NIGEL WILLIAMSON
World stage

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Yup, vinyl!

As Record Store Day starts to become part of the problem, ***Steve Sutherland*** salutes the positive steps being made to solve the current vinyl shortage

The thing with cancel culture is that, although its intentions are good, it does tend to propagate a negative attitude. This can result in our default position on any wrong that needs righting being to just trying to stop it happening. Sometimes, though, this may not be the most helpful or progressive route to take.

Neil Young requested that his music be removed from Spotify to protest COVID misinformation being spread on podcasts hosted by the company and a few like-minded artists followed suit. This immediately raised a convoluted counter-protest about limiting freedom of speech and Spotify stuck to its guns. At the time of writing, the Grammys have just rescinded an invitation for Kanye West to perform at the ceremony due to distress over some of his recent online posts. Again, issues were immediately raised concerning censorship and freedom of expression.

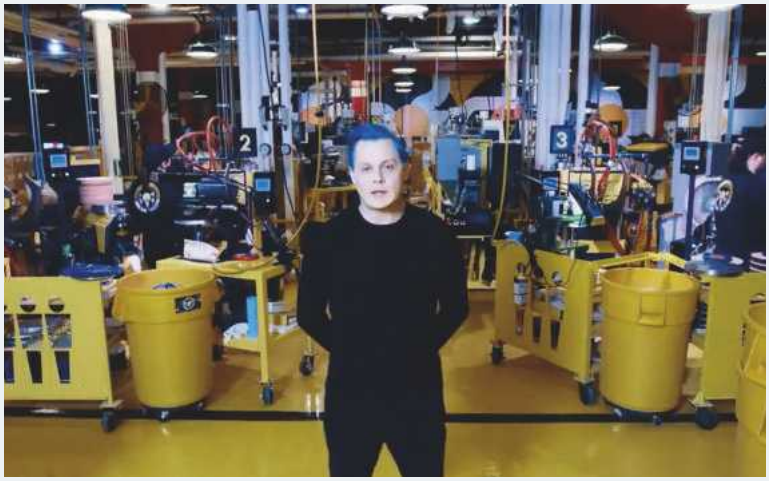
And now there appears to be quite a backlash brewing against Record Store Day as independent shop owners are suggesting it should rethink its model or go on hiatus as they worry that the multi-coloured, limited edition major label releases are critically clogging up vinyl pressing plants already snowed under with orders and unable to cope with supplying smaller independent orders in a timely fashion.

Andy Tucker, who runs Riverman Records in Oxford, addressed the problem in last month's *Destination* noting: "I decided to stop participating (in RSD) because at a time when vinyl production cannot meet demand, it didn't seem right to support another colour variant of an easily available album".

With a good faith investment, we can continue on this upward trajectory

There is an alternative, though. Jack White, who has long owned his own pressing plants via his Third Man company, has challenged the majors to take some positive action. In a recent statement he said: "With industry-wide turnaround times for vinyl currently leaning towards the length of a human pregnancy, it's obvious, in a world so contingent on being of-the-moment and timed just right (a single, an album, a tour *etc*.), these timelines are the killers of momentum, soul, artistic expression, and far too often, livelihoods. Something needs to be done… In this spirit, I turn to our collegial big brothers in the music world, Sony, Universal and Warner, and politely implore them to help alleviate this unfortunate backlog and start dedicating resources to build pressing plants themselves."

The good news is that Press On Vinyl – a new plant focused on independent artists and labels, small-run releases and musicians in the North East – will be opening soon in Middlesbrough. Based in the new Tees-Advance Manufacturing Park, POV aims to press 50,000 records per month to start with and the first pressing will be *You Say She's Satisfied*, the debut EP from local band Komparrison.



Once again, Jack speaks the truth

Meanwhile in Taiwan the Mobineko pressing plant recently announced a new Express service, which aims to fulfil smaller orders of 25 – 100 records with a turnaround time of four to eight weeks.

The plant's founder Richard Dron reckons that regular presses in other plants aren't optimised for small orders, which is where Mobineko Express comes in.

"Our new presses are designed to have tooling that's very fast to change over and they auto-calibrate so the first record is perfect even running from a cold start," he said, going on to explain that the new service is part of the company's approach to cater to independent labels and artists. "I have always firmly believed this is the future of vinyl and the industry needs to look after small artists to survive long term."

No brainer

In his statement Jack White concluded: "Across the globe, there are now a handful of new companies, building both automated and manual vinyl presses. It's easier to purchase a vinyl press now than it has been in four decades. And with more ancillary innovators popping up every day helping advance every facet of the industry, this isn't a difficult decision to make. It's a no-brainer… I truly believe that with a good faith investment in the infrastructure that got us here, we can continue on this upward trajectory and further inspire the worlds around us. Now is the time." In other words: don't be a don't-er, be a do-er ●

STEVE SUTHERLAND
Gone to press

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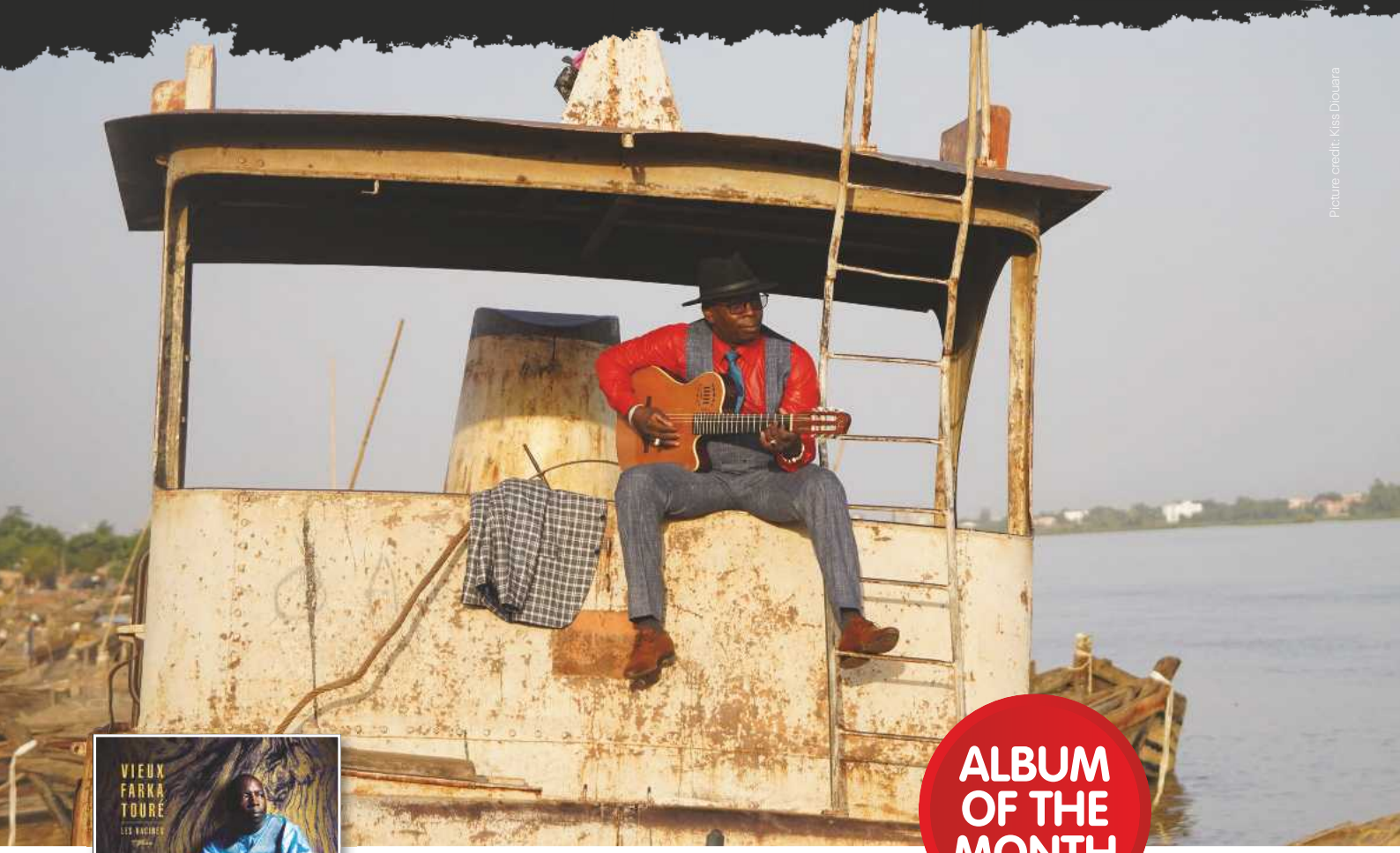
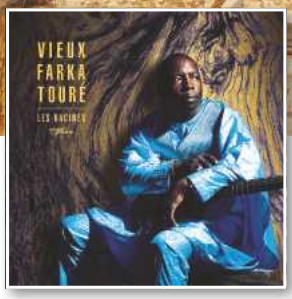
Orchestra
Andris Nelsons

98 Nduduzo Makhathin
In The Spirit Of Ntu

Musicreviews



Picture credit: Kiss Diouara



Vieux Farka Toure
Les Racines

★★★★★

ALBUM OF THE MONTH

CD **World Circuit**

FOLLOWING IN THE footsteps of a musical icon is a tough gig. Just ask Jakob Dylan, Julian Lennon or Ziggy Marley, all of whom at some time could be forgiven for wondering if it might have been safer to have become an estate agent – anything that meant they weren't constantly compared with their famous fathers and judged to have come up short.

Vieux Farka Toure knows the feeling. His father Ali Farka Toure was Africa's most celebrated guitarist, known as "the Hendrix of the Sahara" and cited by western musicians from Jimmy Page to Ry Cooder as their favourite axeman. "It's difficult to be the child of someone who has gone to the top of the mountain. The name follows you and means you have twice as much work to do to establish yourself," Vieux once told this reviewer.

Ali discouraged his son from becoming a professional musician and suggested joining the army as a more "stable" future. Fortunately, Vieux didn't listen and taught himself to play in secret. His father eventually accepted the inevitable and even made a guest appearance on his self-titled debut album – although by the time of its release in 2007, Ali had sadly died of cancer the previous year.

In the 15 years since, Vieux has forged his own musical path on a set of solo albums that expanded boldly on the usual tropes of African music. He's performed alongside Shakira and Alicia Keys and there has been a series of cultural collaborations with the likes of Dave Matthews, jazz guitarist John Scofield and Israeli singer-songwriter Idan Raichel.

After stretching the boundaries, he finally comes full circle with *Les Racines* – an album that pays tribute to the traditional 'desert blues' style of Ali Farka Toure. The result is a deep and powerful record, Vieux's guitar playing matching the virtuosity of his illustrious father on ten fascinating original compositions that very much reflect the fact that in Mali music serves as far more than just mere entertainment.

In a turbulent country ravaged by military coups, jihadist attacks and tribal rebellions and with two-thirds of the population illiterate, Vieux's songs disseminate messages as vitally as Twitter and Facebook do in the western world. There are songs about the need for understanding and unity (*Ngala Kaourene* and *Be Together*), about more traditional values such as fidelity and loyalty (*Lahidou* and *Gabou Ni Tie*) and a namecheck for his influential father on the album's rocking closer *Ndjehene Direne*.

Of course, you can simply enjoy the timeless, mesmerising beat of Vieux's desert blues and thrill to his stellar guitar playing. But an understanding of this music's higher purpose will only enhance your appreciation of what will surely be the finest record out of Africa you're likely to hear this year. ***NW***

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Black Keys

Dropout Boogie

★★★★½

CD **Nonesuch**

JACK WHITE ASIDE, there has perhaps been no more adventurous spirit in American rock over the last two decades than Dan Auerbach – as producer, label owner and guitarist/lead vocalist with the Black Keys. Together with drummer Patrick Carney, the duo has won six Grammys and a Brit award, and their last four albums have all gone top ten in the UK. On *Dropout Boogie*, the pair hark back to the stripped-down blues-rock of their early days making music together in a basement in Akron,

The music harks back to the stripped-down blues-rock of the Black Key's early days

Ohio. Recorded at Auerbach's studio in Nashville, they're joined by ZZ Tops' Billy Gibbons and Kings Of Leon collaborator Angelo Petraglia on a rollicking set of stomping, guitar-driven blues-rock. *Wild Child* sounds like an instant classic, *Burn The Damn Thing Down* bops joyously to an old-fashioned rockabilly boogie and the choogling *For The Love Of Money* evokes blessed memories of Credence Clearwater Revival. ***NW***

Alex Izenberg

I'm Not Here

★★★★☆

CD **Domino**

LA-BASED SONGWRITER IZENBERG is back and this time inspired by writer and theologian Alan Watts. That may be, but what strikes you about *I'm Not Here* is the Anglophile sensibility; with Izenberg mining The Beatles heavily for inspiration. The tracks are quaintly psychedelic in nature and it's this quality – as well as his melodic falsetto – that draws you in until you're fully immersed in his sunshine folk-pop. There are orchestral flourishes, playful lyricism and beguiling harmonies all over the place, leaving you with a feeling of genuine warmth, especially with numbers like *Gemini Underwater* and *Our Love Remains*. Lovely stuff and a delightful surprise. ***PH***

Schumann

HOT PICK

Toccata Op 7
Allegro Op 8
Romances Op 28
Klavierstucke Op 32
Costanze Principe

★★★★★

CD **Piano Classics**

THE TITLE OF this could almost be The Unknown Schumann. Costanze Principe deserves praise for choosing interesting but lesser-known pieces for her debut recording. She has excellent technique and one is immediately aware of a strong personality with clear ideas as to how the music should go. Her playing is tautly structured and she strikes a balance between emotional extremes. When played this well, these pieces emerge in a very positive light. The piano – recorded in a warm acoustic – sounds clear and nicely distanced, but not too reverberant with just enough hall ambience to create a nice sense of depth and space. ***JH***

Stojowski's *Symphony in D minor* was written in 1898, when he was aged 28

Zygmunt Stojowski

Symphony Op 21; Suite for orchestra in E flat Op 9; Deutsche Staatsphilharmonie Rheinland-Pfalz; Antoni Wit

★★★★★

CD **Capriccio**

BORN IN 1870, Zygmunt Stojowski was a noted Polish virtuoso pianist and composer. His D minor symphony won first-prize in the Paderewski competition. It has a stormy first, a dreamy slow movement, a perky defiant scherzo and a festive finale. The three-movement *E flat suite Op 9* dates from 1891. Brahms admired the work, and Tchaikovsky planned to perform it, but alas his premature death in 1893 prevented this. Antoni Wit directs the music with great passion and one could hardly imagine a more committed advocate. The recordings sound rich and full blooded, with excellent immediacy and impact. ***JH***

AUDIOFILE VINYL ★★★★★

Fred Wesley And The Horny Horns

A Blow For Me, A Toot For You

180g vinyl **Speakers Corner**

JAMES BROWN MAY have created funk but everyone knows it was George Clinton who took it to the next level, so it was perhaps inevitable that Clinton would end up working with the key members of Brown's hit-making band. He had Bootsy Collins from the off, but it wasn't until 1975 that JB's trombonist Fred Wesley and sax player/arranger Maceo Parker joined the P-Funk universe. This outing from '77 has more brass on it than the Parliament and Funkadelic albums of the era, but it's very much in the same vein thanks to Bootsy's bass, Bernie Worrell's synth and a raft of stunning backing vocalists that includes a certain Randy Crawford.

As with P-Funk releases, the sound is more about feel than fidelity. It has a slightly dirty quality that makes the funk that much more pungent, but the brass shines well – almost as well as the bass. There is plenty of variety in the six tracks here with the title track using horns mainly for punctuation while Parliament's *Up For The Down Stroke* is dripping with blaring brass. *Between Two Sheets* sees Wesley taking lead and a call-and-response vocal between Maceo Parker and the backing vocalists, while *When In Doubt: Vamp* is pretty intense with some filthy synth. Lovely stuff. ***JK***

Picture credit: Jim Harrington (Black Keys)

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The first phonostage from Rothwell was unveiled back in 1990. In those days even the concept of an outboard phonostage was unknown to most audiophiles, though of course it's commonplace now. There were very few, if any, on the market then, and the first Rothwell phonostage was well ahead of its time. It was a valve design with a separate and substantial power supply, and it had adjustable load resistance and capacitance – ideas which were adopted only years later by others. 30 years on, Rothwell phonostages are still different from the many me-too offerings. All the designs, from entry-level to the top-of-the-range, are totally discrete transistor circuits without any op-amps at all, and they're all still made in the UK.
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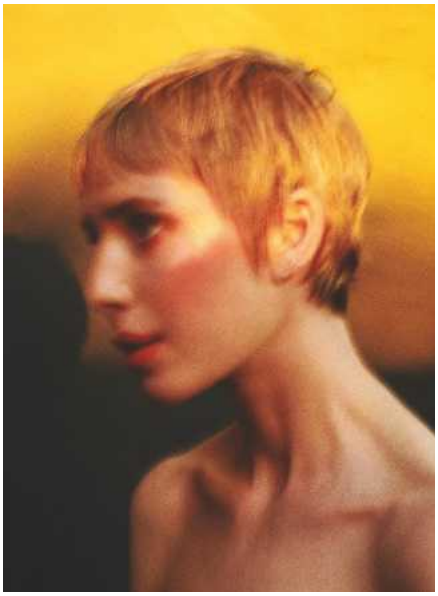
Thanks to Doug Brady Hi-fi for their continuing support and for the use of their dem room featured in the picture.

Lykke Li
Eyeye

★★★★☆

CD **PIAS/Crush**

THE SWEDISH SONGWRITER and model marks her fifth studio album with material that'll be familiar to anyone that's heard her previous work. Swirly, smoky, Lana Del Rey-esque melancholy pop. Not that any of this is a minus. *Happy Hurts* has a melody that you can wrap around your shoulders and enjoy its warmth, its airy vocals hovering over soft electronica. Strong melodies abound with *5D* and *No Hotel* particularly infectious gems. The album never breaks a sweat, keeping everything in a subdued frame that suits looking wistfully out of a foggy window with your chin in your hands. What's not to Lykke? ***PSH***



Nelsons completes his cycle of the Bruckner symphonies for Deutsche Grammophon

Bruckner
Symphonies No.1 and 5
Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra
Andris Nelsons

HOT PICK

★★★★☆

2x CD **Deutsche Grammophon**

COMPLETING HIS BRUCKNER cycle for DG, Nelsons chooses the revised Vienna version for the 1st, with its beefed-up orchestration delivering a strong powerful performance. The mighty 5th – relatively fast at around 74 minutes – is a bit of a rollercoaster white-knuckle ride, veering between unbridled exhilaration and profound spiritual depths. Much of it is absolutely thrilling; a gripping performance that grabs you by the lapels. Heard live, it would be absolutely overwhelming. The Wagner fillers on the first disc are well done and DG's recording is rich, wide and sonorous, with a warm burnished glow to strings and brass. ***JH***

JS Bach
St Matthew Passion
Pygmalion
Raphaël Pichon

★★★★☆

3x CD **Harmonia Mundi**

PICHON DIRECTS A strong, tautly paced performance of Bach's great *Passion* that emphasises the work's drama. For Pichon: "Bach's immense genius is to step completely outside the liturgical framework by placing us at the very heart of the action. We traverse a drama that is above all human; injustice, betrayal, love, sacrifice, forgiveness, remorse, compassion, pity". Small forces are used, but due to the excellence of the singers the effect produced is concentrated, powerful and strong. The recording is at once intimate yet forward sounding and imposing; it's clear, open and detailed, with excellent presence and clarity. ***JH***

Melody's Echo Chamber
Emotional Eternal

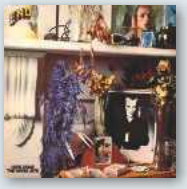
★★★★☆

CD **Domino**

FRENCH ARTIST MELODY Prochet delivers another winsome slice of updated Yé-yé. That may be a lazy comparison to make, but there are clearly some of the characteristics that define the genre here, and provide foundations for a backdrop to build her summery, breathy pop upon. *Pyramids In The Clouds* and *Personal Message* are sung in French, while other tracks feature pleasing bursts of strings and – on *A Slow Dawning of Pace* – light, jazzy sax. *Emotional Eternal* is full of pastoral floatiness, ethereal vocals and perfect summer loveliness. Just check out the closing *Alma – The Voyage* for further proof. ***PH***

COOL COLLECTION

Christopher Millar, aka Rat Scabies, notorious drummer with punk rock rascals and mayhem royalty The Damned, picks a trio of albums that tickled his fancy and have remained a source of personal delight down through the many decades since the pogo frenzy.



Brian Eno
Here Come The Warm Jets
Island (1974)
"Everything that Brian Eno does best is on this record," notes Rat on Eno's debut solo album after quitting Roxy Music. "It's got this wonderful ramshackle element to it plus, it's got some brilliant musicians playing on it. There's that classic guitar solo by Robert Fripp on *Baby's On Fire*. Everybody stops talking when those 32 bars happen. And it moves from mood to mood. Every song on it has an atmosphere."

Santana
Caravanserai
CBS (1972)
Santana's fourth LP explored a jazzier direction than the previous three. Rat explains: "I like the way the songs move and flow and change direction and bring in different moods and atmospheres. It was a very exotic record for me, living in Kingston in Surrey. It felt like I was hearing the real sound of the desert. The musicianship is so great. One of the things I love about Santana is that they always had great drummers."

Portishead
Dummy
Go! Beat (1994)
The first LP from Bristol's trip-hop heroes. Rat says: "It's one of the few albums I can just leave on and it can play all the way through and I don't go: 'Oh, not this track again, I hate this song'. Everything on it sounds like it was recorded in somebody's bedroom. I've never looked up how they actually did it, but the production is amazing. The dynamics and the editing in and out and the mixes are really quite something else. They pick their shots. When they do something, they make sure it's in the right way."

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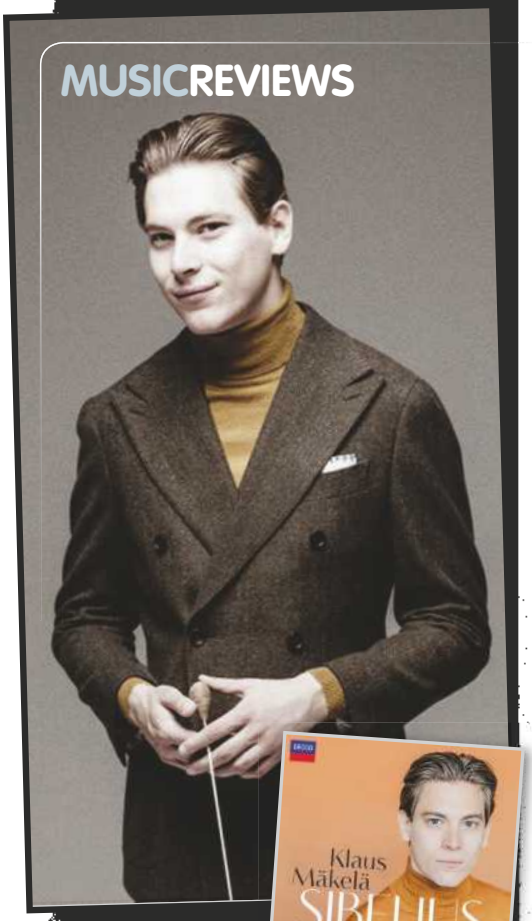

Sibelius

Klaus Mäkelä
Oslo Philharmonic

★★★★★

4x CD **Decca**

FINNISH CONDUCTOR AND cellist Klaus Mäkelä directs the seven Sibelius symphonies in performances notable for their bold vitality. His accounts are powerful, sinewy and full of imaginative touches – impressive for someone aged just 26. The playing is very forthright and confident – brisk, kinetic, exciting and full of incident. But this is a young man's Sibelius, so don't expect slow tempi or profound soul searching. No matter; Mäkelä's interpretations are always stimulating and very idiomatic

Decca's recordings are crisp and immediate, with a forward balance and clear acoustic

and convincing. Without making a fetish of it, he also brings out much hidden detail that often passes unnoticed. Decca's recordings are crisp and immediate, with a sharp forward balance that places the orchestra fairly closely in a clear open acoustic. The sound has plenty of bite and impact, which mirrors Mäkelä's strong dramatic execution perfectly. ***JH***

AUDIOFILE VINYL ★★★★★

Van Der Graaf Generator

The Least We Can Do Is Wave To Each Other; H To He Who Am The Only One; Pawn Hearts; Godbluff

HOT PICK

180g vinyl **UMC/Charisma**

MIGHT VDGG BE the greatest group of the Seventies? On the strength of these reissues, it's certainly evident they were among the most ambitious. These LPs are newly remastered from the original master tapes and cut at Abbey Road Studios. *The Least We Can Do Is Wave To Each Other* and *H To He Who Am The Only One* can be filed under soaring balladry meets ominous, organ-and-sax-drenched pagan psychedelia. *Pawn Hearts* turns up the heat, but is not for the faint hearted. While *Godbluff* exudes a stripped-back confidence that anticipates the next art-rock phase of the group. Essential listening for anyone with ambitious ears. ***SB***

HOT PICK

The Miles Davis Quintet

Relaxin'

★★★★★

180g vinyl **Craft Recordings**

CRAFT'S LEGENDARY SMALL Batch series (limited to just 5,000) continues with this classic mastered by Bernie Grundman from the original analogue tapes and pressed in a one-step lacquer process for improved dynamics. And that's precisely what you get as Miles' first great quintet blow out their hard bop with unerring precision. Never has *You're My Everything* sparkled with such detail and clarity. This pressing shows precisely why analogue recordings still rule for audiophiles – close your eyes and this is as close as it gets to being in the room with Davis and co. Extraordinary. ***JDW***

Stravinsky

Firebird; Petrouchka; Rite Of Spring
London Symphony Orchestra
Sir Simon Rattle

★★★★½

2x SACD **LSO**

RATTLE RECORDED THESE works back in the Eighties for EMI. The timings for these new versions aren't so wildly different, but the LSO's playing has bags more confidence and swagger – a virtuoso brilliance that generates huge excitement and colossal power. Rattle, so often bland in Berlin, has the LSO playing out of their skins and the results are taut and bristling with electricity. The LSO Live recordings (PCM not DSD) are clear and detailed, with massively weighty bass drum thwacks – it's a significantly better sound than usual from this label and greatly superior to the comparatively thin/bright-sounding EMI recordings. ***JH***

Nduduzo Makhathini

In The Spirit Of Ntu

★★★★★

CD **Blue Note**

SOUTH AFRICAN JAZZ pianist Makhathini is tinkling his ivories for us, on this, his tenth album. It's busy, high-octane jazz, pumped full of aural energy. The frenetic percussion alone on *Abantwana Belanga* has me reaching for my asthma inhaler. Makhathini's keys float around his sprawling music, never in a great rush to find a melody or structure, happier to instead wander among the splashy cymbals and snake-charming saxophone. Things take a breather on the mellow *Mama* – its female vocal playfully bobbing around a decorous trumpet. For those that like their jazz exotic and complex this is too good to be missed. ***PSH***

Picture credit: Marco Borggreve (Klaus Mäkelä)

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– HI FI+

“One of the truly special products I have reviewed in the last 18 years”
– Stereophile (USA)

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– Fedeltà Del Suono” (Italy)

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– John Stratton (Owner)

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– Stereo Times

Best of Year Award
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– 6 Moons

“Design of the decade.”
– HI FI World

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– HI FI World

Most wanted component award
– Stereo Times (USA)

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– Image HI FI (Germany)

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Tord Gustavsen Trio
Opening

HOT PICK

★★★★★

CD **ECM**

RENOWNED FOR HIS paired-down style pianist Gustavsen imbues every note with a sublime resonance that reaches your core. Here he is joined by long-time partner Jarle Vespestad on drums and recent recruit Steinar Raknes on bass and electronics. It's the latter's skills in the bowing department that differentiates this album, not least on the proto heavy *Ritual*, but it's the radiance of the piano that breaches the fourth wall. The sound is pristine; super silent backgrounds, strong 3D imaging and perfect tone make your system sound as sweet as a nut. ***JK***

British Piano Concertos
Simon Callaghan
BBC NOW
Martyn Brabbins

★★★★☆

CD **Lyrita**

THESE TUNEFUL WORKS were all written in the first-half of the 20th century – often for a special occasion – and rarely heard since. To quote the booklet notes, they: "travel from the innocent pastiche of Geoffrey Bush's tribute to Thomas Arne, Edmund Rubbra's student essay, the Blues of Arthur Benjamin, the serial language of Humphrey Searle, the drama of Elisabeth Maconchy and the bold humour of film composer John Addison". It's a collection of neglected light-classical music that's an absolute pleasure to listen to. The recordings are clear, clean and well balanced, sounding detailed, rich, smooth and always excellent. ***JH***

Warpaint
Radiate Like This

HOT PICK

★★★★★

CD **Domino**

LA QUINTET WARPAINT return for their first album in six years, and it's not a moment too soon – babies, jobs, tours, solo albums *etc.* aside. *Radiate Like This* presents a group of musicians who are comfortable in their own skin and supremely confident in their abilities. Throughout the 10 tracks they don't try to reinvent their particular wheel, and instead give us sweet, down-tempo indie rock with that patented gauzy, hazy and melancholic shimmer. It's a record to get lost in with sneaky, low-key hypnotism and gentle, quiet passion. As most Warpaint records are. ***PH***

Sibelius, Nielsen
Violin Concertos
Johan Dalene
Royal Stockholm Philharmonic Orchestra
John Storgårds

★★★★★

SACD **BIS**

NIELSEN'S TERSE ASTRINGENT work is poles apart from Sibelius' icy yet richly romantic score. Dalene has a great technique and he makes light of the formidable difficulties found in both works. Storgårds and the excellent orchestra match him and even manage to make Nielsen's acerbic music sound poetic and beautiful. Sibelius' concerto receives a truly fantastic performance – ardent, soaring, lyrical and very athletic when necessary. BIS' recording sounds rich and sonorous, with excellent clarity and a natural balance between soloist and orchestra. Dynamics expand impressively in the big movements. ***JH***

Kevin Morby
This Is A Photograph

★★★★☆

CD **Dead Oceans**

INSPIRED BY FLIPPING through a box of old family photos in the basement of his childhood Kansas home, *This Is A Photograph* finds Morby reflecting on the passage of time, life and death, youthful dreams and where they end up – all that stuff that lockdown induced. He headed to Memphis and documented his ideas at the historic Peabody Hotel before recording the songs with a full band at Sun Studios. The result is a rootsy slice of Americana, the songs ranging from the elegiac such as *Five Easy Pieces* and *It's Over* to the celebratory title track, which hits fever pitch with the chant: "This is what I'll miss about being alive". ***NW***

STREAMING CHARTS

qobuz.com's top-10 most popular streaming albums

1 Wet Leg
Wet Leg

2 Jack White
Fear Of The Dawn

3 Fleetwood Mac
Rumours

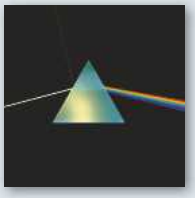
4 Pink Floyd
Hey Hey Rise Up (featuring Andriy Khlyvnyuk)

5 Tord Gustavsen Trio
Opening

6 Father John Misty
Chloë And The Next 20th Century

7 Red Hot Chili Peppers
Unlimited Love

8 Neil Young
Harvest



9 Pink Floyd
The Dark Side Of The Moon (2011 Remastered Version)

10 Calexico
El Mirador

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Turn it on again

From prog pioneers to MOR chart busters, five Charterhouse students took the world by storm. ***Nigel Williamson*** opens the book of Genesis

It's 26 March, 2022 at London's O2. As Genesis leave the stage for what they insist will be the last time, a frail-looking, 71 year-old Phil Collins tells the ecstatic crowd that he's finally going to have to get: "a real job" at last. Alongside him, Mike Rutherford and Tony Banks, who founded the band 55 years ago, could be forgiven a tear in the eye as they wave their final farewell. Behind them is Nic Collins, son of Phil, who took over the drum stool once his father's failing health meant he could no longer play. At just 20 years old, he hadn't even been born when Genesis recorded their last studio album.

As they walk off, Peter Gabriel is waiting in the wings to congratulate his former band mates. Having left for a solo career in 1975, he didn't take the stage with them but wanted to be there to witness the final chapter of a story he had started when he formed Genesis while still at school in 1967.

On Gabriel's departure, Collins, who joined as the drummer in the early Seventies, stepped up to replace him as lead vocalist. Now no longer able to stand for a two-hour set, on the farewell tour he sang songs from every stage of Genesis's long and storied journey from a seated position.

Land of confusion

And what a storied career it was upon which the curtain was coming down. Few bands have undergone more changes of style and substance than Genesis as they metamorphosed from prog-rock pioneers to AOR pop behemoths and from cutting-edge cult act to Princess Diana's favourite band.

In the Seventies they were all concept albums, complex arrangements and theatrical excess, with Gabriel appearing on stage dressed as a flower, wearing a fox's head and sporting a pair of bat's wings. The masks, make-up and props almost made Ziggy Stardust seem tame in comparison.

Then in the Eighties Genesis became a straight-up pop act scoring huge chart-topping radio friendly hits such as *That's All*, *In Too Deep* and *Throwing It All Away*.

To this day it remains hard to find anyone who equally enjoys both iterations of the band. Those who love the Collins-led radio-friendly pop hits find the Gabriel-led albums of Genesis Mark 1 to be overblown

and pretentious. On the other hand, prog-rock fans accuse Genesis Mark 2 of selling out and would concur with Robert Hilburn, the dean of American rock critics, who dismissed the group's later music as: "flabbergastingly insignificant".

Whichever side of the divide one is on, the stats are mind-boggling. Their total sales are estimated to have topped 100 million with 21 UK top-40 hits and six number-one albums. In America the tally stands at six platinum albums and nine top-five singles.

The influence of Genesis on their fellow musicians has been enormous, too. In the Seventies they were the model for everyone from Supertramp to early Queen. In the Eighties Simple Minds, Echo & the Bunnymen and The Human League cited Genesis as a touchstone. The legacy has continued into the 21st century with bands such as Elbow owing a heavy debt to Genesis. "They were a huge influence, both with Peter Gabriel and Phil Collins singing. There's a magical quality. They were my nursery rhymes", says Elbow's lead singer Guy Garvey, a rare example of a fan who admires the group's entire oeuvre.

We can't dance

Flashback to 1967 and the elite environs of Charterhouse, a 400 year-old public school in Surrey on whose playing fields the empire was built and where Gabriel, bassist Rutherford and keyboard player Banks are all pupils sitting their GCSEs. Joined by class mates drummer Chris Stewart and guitarist Anthony Phillips, they form a band.

To produce their first record, they turn to another who once wore the school tie, Jonathan King, an Old Carthusian who had scored a novelty hit single two years earlier with *Everyone's Gone To The Moon*.

Needing a name, they almost became Gabriel's Angels but sticking with the biblical theme, King suggested they call themselves Genesis. With Gabriel, Stewart and Phillips all due to return to school in September 1968, their debut album had to be recorded in ten days during the summer holidays.

Titled *From Genesis To Revelation*, the album was a half-baked collection of vaguely psychedelic ditties and sixth-form philosophising with orchestral arrangements added without the band's knowledge. It sank without trace, selling 639 copies in its first year. The excuse given at the time was that many record shops had filed it in their religious music sections. A more plausible explanation was that it wasn't very good.

The Genesis story might have reached its exodus right there, but in the summer of 1969, Phillips, Banks, Rutherford and Gabriel reconvened and agreed to give it another shot by turning professional.

When Stewart's parents insisted he finish his education, John Mayhew came in on drums and his day job as a carpenter proved as useful as his drumming. He installed proper seating in the former bread delivery

Collins proposed they don't replace Gabriel and instead become an instrumental band

van which transported Genesis to gigs, and built cabinets for their speakers.

Somewhat ungratefully, he was sacked after one album and replaced by Collins. He had allegedly invoked the ire of his band mates when their record company offered to put them on a retainer of £15 per week and he told them that £10 would be enough.

Nevertheless, 1971's *Trespass*, the album on which Mayhew played, laid down a marker that Genesis were prog-rockers of considerable potential. Incorporating experimental song structures fusing acoustic and electric elements and featuring elaborate lyrical themes, today the record sounds a little dated. Yet at the time it sounded fresh and adventurous and the nine-minute extended epic *The Knife* became the first genuine Genesis classic.

The departure of Phillips following the album's release resulted in another

ALBUM BY ALBUM

1969

FROM GENESIS TO REVELATION

Recorded when they were still at school, producer Jonathan King fashioned a sound somewhere between the Moody Blues and the Bee Gees on an erratic debut.

1970

TRESPASS

Genesis' reputation as prog-rock visionaries starts here. Complex lyrics, dramatic instrumental passages and in *The Knife* their first classic, which became a concert favourite.

1971

NURSERY CRYME

A landmark album and the first to feature Collins, which defined the band's distinctively English style. *The Musical Box*, which took up most of side two, remains a prog landmark to this day.

1972

FOXTROT

The Gabriel-era lineup at its prog peak. *Watcher Of The Skies* and the seven-piece suite *Supper's Ready* are the showpieces, but there's not a weak moment to be heard anywhere.

1973

SELLING ENGLAND BY THE POUND

Arguably an even better set than *Foxtrot* with some of Gabriel's finest songwriting – and in *I Know What I Like (In Your Wardrobe)* they come up with their first poptastic hit.

By 1980 the band was a trio and had come full circle to produce commercial pop

existential crisis, which left the band's future in doubt. But after several unsatisfactory gigs without a guitarist, Gabriel spotted an advert in *Melody Maker* placed by Steve Hackett seeking to work with "receptive musicians, determined to drive beyond existing stagnant music forms".

I know what I like

The new lineup of Peter Gabriel, Mike Rutherford, Tony Banks, Phil Collins and Steve Hackett went into the studio to record 1971's *Nursery Cryme*, boosting the sound with the addition of a Mellotron, bought from King Crimson.

One of the striking aspects of *Trespass* was that along with the likes of Syd Barrett and Kevin Ayers, it sounded quintessentially and quirkily English at a time when most homegrown rock music was still looking to America for its inspiration. *Nursery Cryme* refined the Englishness still further, particularly on the surreal 11-minute opener *The Music Box*.

The masks, make-up and props almost made Ziggy Stardust seem tame in comparison

A macabre story set in Victorian times involving a young boy named Henry, who is accidentally decapitated by his friend Cynthia while playing croquet, his spirit as an old man is then unleashed when she plays his musical box. He attempts to seduce Cynthia until the nurse enters the room and hurls the box at the wall, which destroys Henry's ghost. The song became a live favourite with Gabriel adopting various stage costumes.

Gabriel's prog ambitions hit new heights on 1972's *Foxtrot*, with its 23 minute seven-part suite *Supper's Ready*. Elsewhere, the sci-fi themed *Watcher Of The Skies* took its title from a line by Keats, *Horizons* was inspired by a Bach cello piece and tricky arrangements and weird time signatures abounded.

If it seemed that prog couldn't get much prog-ier, Gabriel was determined that it could and would. *Selling England By The Pound* (1973) doubled down on the English romanticism and sounded like a manifesto against the Americanisation of British culture while the Beatlesque *I Know What I Like (In Your Wardrobe)* gave the group its first hit single and pointed the way to the pop songs that would come to dominate in the post-Gabriel era.

Watcher of the skies

His *coup de grace* – and swansong – came with the 1974 double album *The Lamb Lies Down On Broadway*, a rock opera about Rael, a Puerto Rican youth living in New York who embarks on a spiritual quest to establish his freedom and identity and which drew on influences as diverse as John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, *West Side Story* and the psychoanalysis of Carl Jung.

Genesis immediately embarked on a 102-date world tour, playing the album's 90-plus minutes in its entirety. Halfway through, Gabriel, whose on stage costumes were now more theatrical than ever, announced his intention to leave at the end of the tour.

His departure led to much speculation that the band would fold, but according to Banks his decision was welcomed. "Pete was getting too big for the group. He was being portrayed as if he was 'the man' and it really wasn't like that. So it was actually a bit of a relief," he later wrote.

But how to continue without such a charismatic frontman? Collins proposed that they shouldn't try to replace Gabriel and should become an all-instrumental act, like a jazz combo. When that plan got no support, an ad was placed in *Melody Maker* for a new singer, More than 400 applied and when not one of them was deemed suitable, a reluctant Collins was promoted to lead singer by default.

His elevation may have been accidental yet it proved to be inspired. On 1976's *Trick Of*

1974

THE LAMB LIES DOWN ON BROADWAY

Gabriel's swansong – and a bravura one at that with a double concept album. Some critics felt they had over reached themselves, but many fans regard it as the band's finest hour.

1976

A TRICK OF THE TAIL

Collins steps up to the mic and almost sounds more like Gabriel than Gabriel on an album that adheres closely to the prog-rock template and includes some of the group's most attractive songs to date.

1976

WIND & WUTHERING

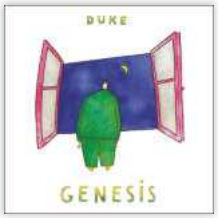
The last album to feature guitarist Steve Hackett – and the last to link back to the band's prog origins. Standout songs include *One For The Vine* while *Your Own Special Way* gave them their first US hit single.

1978

AND THEN THERE WERE THREE...

Down to a trio, Genesis Mark Two begins here with Collins dominant on a set of tightly constructed, short, catchy pop-rock songs, the best of which is the hit single *Follow You Follow Me*.

1980



DUKE

A new decade finds Genesis making concise, accessible radio-friendly pop singles such as *Turn It On Again* and *Misunderstanding*, all synths and drum machines combined with weightless AOR arrangements.

The Tail and the following year's *Wind And Wuthering*, Genesis continued in the same prog-rock style as before, with Collins proving to be a fine substitute for Gabriel, even when singing his predecessor's old material.

The album's release coincided with the punk insurrection, which might easily have finished Genesis, as it did a number of prog acts. Yet despite the loss of Hackett, who left in 1977, they opted to continue and the next album was fittingly titled *And Then There Were Three* (1978).

Gabriel and Hackett, it seemed, were not only gone but almost forgotten, too, as the slimmed-down trio crafted a set of accessible pop-rock songs, including the hit single *Follow You Follow Me*. The video for the song even featured on *Top Of The Pops*, a first for Genesis which inevitably led to cries of: "sell-out".

By the time of 1980's *Duke*, Genesis had turned into a full-on commercial pop-rock band, using state-of-the-art synths and drum machines. At this point most of the group's prog fanbase abandoned them, but many more arrived to replace them as the album went to number one and spawned three hit singles.

A reluctant Phil Collins took over by default when Peter Gabriel decided to move on

In too deep

Abacab (1981), *Genesis* (1983) and *Invisible Touch* (1986) followed in similar style as the band, boosted by Collins' parallel and stellar solo career – became one of the biggest-selling acts of the decade. All three albums went to number one in the UK and were multi-platinum in America, where no fewer than five singles from *Invisible Touch* became top-five sellers, a feat previously only achieved by Michael Jackson, Janet Jackson and Madonna. After a ten-month world tour on which they sold more than three-million tickets, Genesis could more than afford to take the next five years off. When they returned with 1991's *We Can't Dance*, the critics sneered, although in truth the album was musically weightier and found the group tackling serious grown-up subjects. *No Son of Mine* was about the domestic abuse of a schoolboy and *Dreaming While You Sleep* concerned the guilt of a hit-and-run driver. *Tell Me Why* criticised the first Gulf War and *Since I Lost You* was written by Collins for fellow superstar and friend Eric Clapton after the untimely death of his four-year-old son.

Their sales topped 100 million with 21 UK top 40 hits and six number one albums

The album went to number one in the UK and sold more than four-million copies worldwide. Yet there was to be just one more Genesis studio album – and it was not to include Collins who in 1996 announced his departure after 25 years in the band.

To replace him Banks and Rutherford recruited Ray Wilson, singer with obscure Scottish rockers Stiltskin. In retrospect it was an ill-starred move, although they argued not unreasonably that they had successfully replaced Gabriel so there was no reason why they couldn't replace Collins.

Wilson sang on 1997's *Calling All Stations* but the American tour which was meant to follow was cancelled due to the poor response and by the end of the decade it had been announced that Genesis was to be no more.

Since then, the group has had a stop-start existence. In 2006 Banks, Rutherford and a returning Collins announced that Genesis had been reborn – at least for touring purposes. Unfortunately, the tour left Collins with a dislocated vertebra in his neck that caused nerve damage in his hands. No longer able to drum, he announced his retirement as an active musician, although after major surgery on his back in 2015 he was able to resume his career.

With unfortunate timing, Collins, Rutherford and Banks announced Genesis' comeback tour in March 2020, two weeks before the world went into lockdown. The dates were rescheduled twice and then postponed again due to a case of COVID-19 within the band so that the final shows did not eventually take place until a full two years after they were first announced.

Staged under the banner of The Last Domino? Tour, did the oddly inserted question mark offer just a hint that perhaps the game might not quite be over? We shall see, but if it really is the end, Genesis have left us with not just an extraordinary legacy, but several of them over their different iterations and reincarnations ●

Picture credit: Atlantic Records

1981

ABACAB

The title punned on the group's embrace of conventional song structure – and they lived up to it with hits such as *Keep It Dark* and *No Reply At All*, which featured the Earth, Wind & Fire horn section.

1983

GENESIS

Having found a sassy hit formula, the band saw no reason to change it, as pulsating pop tunes such as *That's All* and *Mam* joined the MOR balladry of *Taking It All Too Hard* in chart ascendancy.

1986

INVISIBLE TOUCH

The biggest-selling album of the group's career with an astonishing five top-five singles including the title track, *Throwing It All Away*, *In Too Deep*, *Land Of Confusion* and *Tonight, Tonight, Tonight*.

1991

WE CAN'T DANCE

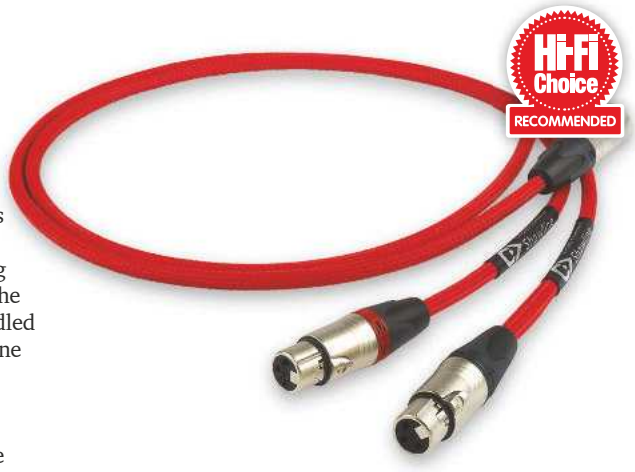
After a five-year break, Genesis returned with an album of serious songs addressing weighty subjects – but its pop melodicism meant it still sold four million copies and spawned a hatful of hit singles.

1997

CALLING ALL STATIONS

Following Collins' departure, Scottish singer Ray Wilson joined Banks and Rutherford on Genesis' final studio album. An oddly incoherent mix of pop and art-rock, you can hear why they declined to record a follow up.

Chord Company
Shawline XLR cable



THE PROVISION OF XLR balanced audio connections on domestic audio equipment seems to be on the rise, and to meet this demand the Chord Company offers an XLR version of its Shawline analogue interconnect range.

Assembled by hand, the Shawline XLRs use silver-plated copper conductors insulated with an FEP dielectric. These are screened with a composite material designed to work over a wide bandwidth. Three identical conductors are used for all three connections (hot, cold and earth), as well as the company's Tuned ARAY conductor geometry.

Connecting the Shawline XLR between my Studer A810 pro tape machine and my preamp, I play a 15IPS copy-master tape of the Prague Radio Symphony Orchestra performing Prokofiev's *Cinderella*. The opening of *Cinderella Dreams About The Ball* has a slightly reflective mood, which progresses to a more sprightly dance tune. The superb depth of the recording is brilliantly conveyed and all of the complexities of the piece are handled with effortless ease by the Shawline XLR interconnect.

Happy blending

For some vocals, I turn next to the soprano Daisy Brown singing *Agnus Dei* by Mozart on a copy-master tape from Chasing The Dragon. Brown's vocals have a clarity and joyfulness that blends beautifully with the piano accompaniment in this rather captivating track. The piano is clearly positioned behind the soprano and the overall depth of this recording is very faithfully conveyed by the Shawline cable.

Switching reels to a modern copy-master tape from UltraAnalogue Recordings of Grieg's *Cello Sonata*, the imaging of the cello and piano is pin-sharp while the excellent dynamic range of this recording is clearly transported by the XLR interconnect. All this adds up to a wonderfully realistic and totally believable performance in my listening room.

The Shawline is a first-rate cable whose performance will be very much at home in any high-end system. ***NR***

DETAILS

PRICE
£250 for 1m cable

TELEPHONE
01980 625700

WEBSITE
chord.co.uk

OUR VERDICT
★★★★★

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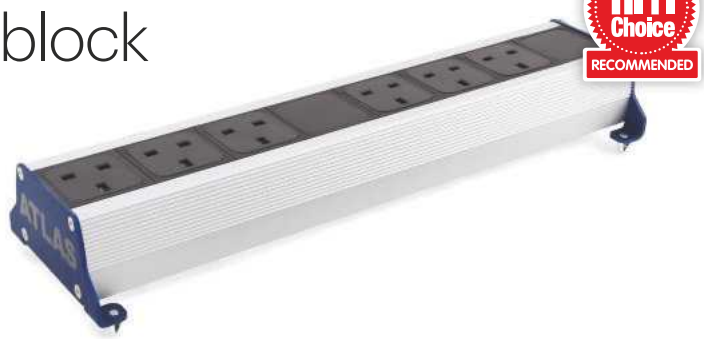

WE LIVE IN an electrically noisy soup, permeated by all manner of interference that can adversely affect our audio systems. Low-cost mains distribution blocks and extensions can contribute to this degradation as they typically incorporate noisy neon power indicators, fuse holders and low-grade wiring/bus-bars, and offer little in the way of shielding. The Eos 2.5 from Atlas Cables of Kilmarnock is a robust, no-nonsense screened power extension block designed to deliver unimpeded power.

Its six high-quality sockets are housed in an aluminium chassis with an earth binding post. Each is optimised for low contact resistance and minimal resistive losses. The power block is intended for use with one of the company's screened mains cables to preserve the RFI screening. Nema and Shuko mains socket variants are also available on request.

Our review sample is supplied with the company's Eos dd screened mains cable (*HFC* 452) with dual drain technology designed to act as a filter against harmful incoming RF AC power contamination. The Eos dd cable is available in 1m, 1.5m, 2m, and 3m lengths.

Socket to me

The sockets grip the mains plugs of my equipment very well and are clearly of high quality. When I use the Eos 2.5 in place of a standard six-way mains block, I certainly discern subtle improvements in the music in terms of clarity and a lower noise floor. For example, when I play a lovely recording of the *Chaconne* by Robert de Visee performed on the theorbo by Lynda Sayce, the natural acoustics of Temple Church in London where this piece was recorded sound so much clearer with the Eos 2.5 block employed, and they do not interfere with the superb detail of the theorbo. I am also aware of a deeper blackness at the end of the track when the music reaches its conclusion.

The Eos 2.5 is a great mains block for any high-end audio system. ***NR***

DETAILS

PRICE
£395 + £145 for 1m Atlas Eos dd power cable

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OUR VERDICT
★★★★★

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CD PLAYERS

Audiolab 6000CDT

PRICE: £380 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 447

The 6000CDT is exceptional at revealing what's on your discs to deliver a great big soundstage with plenty of detail inside. It can dig down deep into the mix to eke out the different musical strands while dynamically and rhythmically it's hard to beat at the price. In short, it's a super, highly affordable audiophile CD transport.

★★★★★

Cambridge Audio AXC35

PRICE: £300 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 454

Something of a budget marvel, you'll have to work extra hard to get the AXC35 to put a foot wrong. Bass is firm, detailed and blessed with excellent timing; the tonal palette is pleasingly broad and clean; and though the soundstage doesn't extend much beyond the speakers, there's great depth perspective.

★★★★★

Exposure XM CD

PRICE: £1,200 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 455

A highly likeable half-width compact disc player that presents music in an enjoyable yet technically accurate manner, the XM CD might lack the operational slickness and versatility of some rivals, but it more than makes up for it with its energetic, lively sound, dynamic light and shade and charming character.

★★★★½

Métronome Technologie Le Player 2S

PRICE: £5,100 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 449

As good as the sweet treble and rich bass are, what really impresses here is how when fed weaker CDs and impoverished MP3s the delivery remains unflappable and composed as layers of detail are locked into sharp focus.

★★★★★

Musical Fidelity M3scd

PRICE: £1,150 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 450

Able to string together elements of the mix dextrously for a natural and believable sound, the M3scd's combination of detail and rhythmic alacrity are highly impressive while its excellent timing and tonal balance leave you wanting more. With its lovely, lyrical sonics oozing detail and subtlety, this is an extremely capable player.

★★★★★

Rotel CD11 Tribute

PRICE: £400 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 469

A stunning team up between Marantz legend Ken Ishiwata before his sad passing and hi-fi luminary Karl-Heinz Fink, this is not one of those do-it-all players. Instead, its simple, refined sound and no-nonsense operation combine for a stunningly frill-free approach to superb playback at a great price.

★★★★★

ALSO CONSIDER

Audiolab
8300CDQ
£1,100 *HFC* 448
Taking the winning recipe of the 8200CDQ and adding an upgraded DAC with DSD playback, the accurate and uncoloured sound of the Audiolab is unmistakable. Vast amounts of detail are extracted from the mix, soundstaging is incredible and music flows naturally.

★★★★★

Leema Acoustics
Stream IV
£2,300 *HFC* 456
The latest update to this long-established player feels a considerable step forward. CD playback is highly refined, assured and transparent, bass is rock solid with visceral depth that positively grips your solar plexus and streaming shares all these qualities for the best of both worlds.

★★★★½

Marantz
SACD 30n
£2,700 *HFC* 468
While its styling might be a touch divisive, the SACD 30n's involving, detailed and highly refined sound is beyond dispute whether it be with SACD or CD. Meanwhile, its neat supreme streaming integration ensures a great performance without discs too.

★★★★★

Roksan
K3 CD Di
£1,300 *HFC* 403
Offering the relatively rare combination of smooth tonality with a lively and animated way of presenting the music, the K3 CD Di displays a sweet and even tonal balance with a panoramic soundstage. In short, it's closer to good analogue sound than digital.

★★★★★

AMPLIFIERS

Copland
CSA150

PRICE: £4,988 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 479

A tube/transistor hybrid that's more than the sum of its parts, the CSA150 is not just a fine all-rounder as it also excels sonically with a big, strong, engaging performance that's also surprisingly subtle and detailed for such a muscular thing. Well worth an audition, it's a bargain at the price considering all that it does.

★★★★★

Cyrus Audio
i7-XR

PRICE: £2,300 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 473

Cyrus' engineers have been let off the leash budget-wise and the result is very impressive because while this is still unquestionably a Cyrus integrated amp – it looks like one, feels like one and has all the features we'd expect from the company – everything is ramped up and sounds better than ever before.

★★★★★

Exposure
3510

PRICE: From £2,250 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 485

Delivering speaker control like a sergeant major on a power trip, you'd be forgiven for thinking the 3510 has been transported from the Eighties – all minimalist design and line-level inputs. Additional USB/DSD64 DAC and MC or MM phono boards are available and the performance comes across like a sizable blast from the past.

★★★★★

Quad
Vena II

PRICE: From £650 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 448

With a comprehensive spec that moves Quad's most compact integrated on and enough weight to bring any type of music so thrillingly to life, the Vena II does a fine job of giving bass natural weight, snap and dynamic ability while delivering a big room-filling sound that belies those tiny dimensions.

★★★★★

Rega
io

PRICE: £380 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 475

It might appear small and rather plain and it might not be over flowing with features or boast a huge amount of Watts, but give the io a talented source and you can't fail to be impressed by its outrageous musicality and lightness of foot. It's at one with the music with a supple fluency and rhythmical literacy.

★★★★★

Yamaha
A-S3200

PRICE: £5,000 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 464

This highly accomplished performer succeeds through its breadth of ability rather than exceeding in one specific area. A highly capable performer, its snappy sound and gutsy demeanour combine with speed, grip versatility and power to create a great-looking beast of an integrated.

★★★★★

PRE/POWER AMPLIFIERS

Cambridge Audio
Edge W
£2,500 *HFC* 447
The Edge W power amplifier quotes 2x 100W RMS output and has oodles of power to drive pretty much any speaker. It has a neutral sound with a hint of sweetness and an upbeat nature underwritten by plenty of insight that's seriously good for the money.

★★★★★

Longdog Audio
P6100M
£3,500 *HFC* 469
They may look and feel old-fashioned, but the P6100Ms are one of those rare but happy hi-fi surprises: seriously high-end sound for mid-price money. More transparent than they have any right to be, they have a fluid and mellifluous midband and pack one hell of a punch.

★★★★★

Exposure
XM7/XM9
£1,240/£1,390 *HFC* 429
Fast, open and three dimensional, the XM9 pairing is capable of driving more awkward speaker loads to high levels without any complaint. Partnered with the XM7 preamp/DAC, Exposure's house sound means a fulsome bass, midband detail and a smooth, yet spacious treble.

★★★★★

Rotel
Michi P5/S5
£3,300/£5,400 *HFC* 467
Rotel's high-end sub-brand might not be the last word in attack and slam, and some might bemoan its lack of detail. But that misses the point: when it comes to weight, scale and a breath-takingly natural approach to making music, few combos come even close to this one.

★★★★★

CABLES – INTERCONNECTS

Atlas Cables
Element Achromatic

PRICE: £86 for 1m **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 485

Achromatic means without colour and that's very much what you get with this affordable offering. Compared with previous Atlas Element cables this has increased OCC copper content on the conductors and a new process for reduced distortion. The result is great spaciousness to the soundstage and imaging plus powerful bass.

★★★★★

Black Rhodium
Minuet

PRICE: £160 for 1m **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 453

Replacing the Prelude, this RCA interconnect is screened and employs silver-plated copper wire to improve clarity and high-frequency performance. The result is remarkably sophisticated for the money with detail, positioning of instruments, imaging and separation absolutely nailed on.

★★★★★

Chord Company
Clearway

PRICE: £100 for 1m **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 485

A fantastic performer across a broad range of different music styles, the Clearway features the company's proprietary ARAY conductor geometry and ensures that all the detail of the individual instruments remains well defined, throughout playback – adding to the overall realism of the production.

★★★★★

Ecosse Cables
Master Reference SE

PRICE: £425 for 0.8m **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 455

Designed to convey an even greater degree of transparency, detail and three dimensionality than its rival interconnects, the Master Reference SE certainly doesn't disappoint. Punchy basslines, well-defined positioning, supreme soundstage width and clear focus are very much the order of the day here.

★★★★★

Kimber Kable
Select USB-Cu

PRICE: From £563 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 456

Terminated with hand-made purpleheart and gaboon ebony connector housings, this distinctive USB cable achieves a soundstage that is both wide and deep. The edginess of violins is deeply impressive while instruments are perfectly located across the room revealing a stunning mix of definition and clarity.

★★★★½

QED
Performance Audio 40i

PRICE: £55 for 1m **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 485

The stand-out winner of our interconnect *Group Test*, this black pearl-sheathed offering pairs a supreme sonic showing with impressive build quality and performances free from muddiness at a very generous price.

★★★★★

"A man who stops advertising to save money is like a man who stops a clock to save time."
- Henry Ford

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CABLES – MAINS POWER

Atlas Cables
Eos dd

PRICE: £145 for 1m **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 452

Referring to 'dual drain' technology, the Eos dd is designed to act as a filter against incoming contamination. The result is an inky blackness between musical phrases and a supremely low noise floor, while detail and imaging improve as interference is banished.

★★★★★

Black Rhodium
Stream

PRICE: £450 for 1.7m **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 430

Black Rhodium has discovered that optimum sound quality is obtained from cables of 1.7m, hence this offering featuring silver-plated copper conductors. And who are we to argue, considering the impressive clarity and focus of instruments combined with a noise floor displaying an impressive lack of interference.

★★★★½

Chord Company
Shawline

PRICE: £200 for 1m **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 438

Available at a variety of lengths, the Shawline mains cable is made from three lots of 14 AWG multi-strand conductors. Test highlights include superior front-to-back imaging, with all the tonal complexities of the instruments really coming to life, delivering genuine energy to orchestral performances.

★★★★★

Furutech
Roxy

PRICE: £233 for 1.5m **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 447

Connecting the Roxy to a source component immediately removes a layer of glare and 'glint' from the sound; tonally it's darkly translucent instead of shiny white gloss, allowing the listener to hear more into the music and appreciate the space between the notes.

★★★★★

IsoTek
Evo3 Initium

PRICE: £65 for 1.5m **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 413

IsoTek's entry-level power cable has a distinctive opalescent green finish that is flexible and stylish. Once employed, there's a noiceable step up in the quality of musical instrument focus while clarity improves as the background becomes quieter and bass more extended.

★★★★★

Russ Andrews
30th Anniversary YellO

PRICE: £65 for 1m **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 423

First introduced in the nineties, the YellO benefits from years of research into the effects of mains quality. Employing pure copper conductors, this relaunched cable results in a wider, deeper soundstage and the improvement it brings to instrument focus has to be heard to be believed.

★★★★★

DragonFly Cobalt

DAC + Preamp + Headphone Amp

The award-winning DragonFly Cobalt has the robust 2.1-volt output to drive almost any headphone, uses a bit-perfect digital volume control for outstanding signal-to-noise ratio, enables seamless compatibility with Apple and Android devices, and is an exceptionally competent and affordable MQA Renderer.

Cobalt's precedent-setting performance is made possible by:

- New ESS ES9038Q2M DAC chip with a minimum-phase slow roll-off filter for more natural sound.
- New Microchip PIC32MX274 microprocessor reduces current draw and increases processing speed by 33%.
- Improved power-supply filtering, specifically designed to reduce WiFi, Bluetooth, and cellular noise.
- Includes a form-fitting Carbon-level DragonTail USB-A to USB-C adaptor.

From MP3 to MQA and Hi-Res, DragonFly Cobalt preserves the body, warmth, and natural color in all your music. Experience more beauty at home and everywhere you listen.

audioquest

NETWORK AUDIO PLAYERS

Auralic
Altair G2.1

PRICE: £4,600 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 482

Not just a network-attached DAC/preamp, with the addition of onboard storage the Altair G2.1 morphs into a self-contained music hub that reveals itself to be a deliciously neutral and clean source. It presents high levels of detail without sounding mechanical or artificial and musical involvement is top notch across all genres.

★★★★★

Cambridge Audio
Edge NQ

PRICE: £3,500 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 447

Something of a departure from CA's usual fare, this network music player also combines the additional versatility of a DAC and preamp to serve up a sumptuously wide recorded acoustic, with a hugely expansive sound that partners massive punch with great precision for a clean, direct and enjoyable sound.

★★★★★

Matrix Audio
Element X

PRICE: £2,800 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 473

Supporting everything from network streaming to 768kHz PCM, DSD1024, MQA and Roon, the Element X can also comfortably drive a variety of headphones. Tardis like it hides a multitude of features in its svelte shell and operationally it proves pretty much impossible to throw off course. Be warned, it goes seriously loud.

★★★★★

NAD
M33

PRICE: £4,000 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 466

Hot on the heels of 2019's M10, the M33 has raised the bar even further. In its full-size guise it offers the same style, flexibility and ease of use combined with a performance that's just as arresting with analogue sources as it is when streaming. Throw in futureproof MDC updating slots, and you're on to a winner.

★★★★★

Naim
ND5 XS 2

PRICE: £2,300 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 454

Delivering Naim's distinctive flare and typically impressive sound – superb low-end drive with texture and presence combined with a delicious sweetness – this Roon-compatible network music player is supremely engineered, over flowing with useful features and capable of a sparkling performance.

★★★★½

Yamaha
WXAD-10

PRICE: £150 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 442

One of the smallest options around, this MusicCast network audio player might not look like much, but don't be fooled – it has it where it counts. Tonal balance is neutral; bass is well integrated with good detail; and the space and three dimensionality add to the realism, making it great value for money.

★★★★½

MUSIC SERVERS

Bluesound
Vault 2i
£1,100 ***HFC* 452**
If you see yourself buying into the BluOS ecosystem favoured by the Canadian brand and its cohorts, this 2TB, server, ripper and player compatible with up to 24-bit/192kHz PCM and MQA files, is a great way of starting off in one room and expanding as your system grows.

★★★★½

Innuos
Zenith Mk3
From £3,000 ***HFC* 451**
With one of the best interfaces going and a potently flexible spec, the 4TB, CD ripping Zenith can be used as a Roon Core and delivers an outstanding performance that inspires confidence even for those starting out. It should be right near the top of any shortlist.

★★★★½

Melco
N100 EX
£2,000 ***HFC* 462**
Following a software update back in December 2019, the N100 became the EX so it's now powered by the excellent Intelligent Music Library system – the best in the business. The sharp lines of the chassis combined with the crisp, clean sound help seal the deal.

★★★★★

Naim
Uniti Core
£1,900 ***HFC* 438**
Equipped with a CD ripper and 1TB SSD, the Uniti Core takes on an understated role as it handles 32-bit/384kHz PCM and DSD128 music files impeccably. Presentation is pleasingly neutral and it simply lets whatever network audio player is attached get on with the music.

★★★★★

DACS

Alpha Design Labs
Stratos

PRICE: £1,315 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 455

Remarkably flexible at the price, the Stratos offers an impressively wide-reaching range of features without compromising sound quality. The soundstage is wide and open with a refined presentation, delicate details are reproduced with breath-taking accuracy and instrument separation and location are absolutely spot on.

★★★★★

Audiolab
M-DAC+

PRICE: £800 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 449

While some DACs can dive deeper into a recording, what's so likeable about the M-DAC+ is its poise, control and command of the bigger musical picture. With its stunning grasp of flow and tempo, there's a welcome warmth to its presentation and its solid three dimensional imaging is second to none.

★★★★★

Chord Electronics
TT2

PRICE: £3,400 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 468

We could talk about dynamic range and noise floor modulation, but the TT2 simply creates a more believable illusion of a physical presence and space than its rivals. Combining superb build, typical design flair and stunning sound quality, this is a DAC that not only believes in the superiority of digital, but goes on to prove it too.

★★★★★

iFi Audio
Zen DAC V2

PRICE: £160 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 480

Supporting PCM files up to 384kHz and up to DSD256, this converter – that doubles as a headphone amp – is an absurdly talented option for the money. Connected to a digital source capable of delivering a lossless signal or better, it is consistently capable of an outstanding audio performance.

★★★★★

Matrix Audio
Mini-i Pro 3

PRICE: £900 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 482

Claiming the spoils in *HFC* 482's DAC *Group Test*, the Mini-i Pro 3 offers a winning combination of comprehensive spec and features, a stunning casework and – regardless of which way you elect to employ its services – it sounds absolutely superb. In short, it's the most accomplished digital front end for under a grand.

★★★★★

PS Audio
DirectStream

PRICE: £4,860 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 468

By converting everything it's fed to DSD, the DirectStream reveals more from CDs than its rivals for a superlative analogue-like sound that has more in common with master tape than anything digital can usually muster. Low-level resolution, refinement and a majestic sense of composure add to the positives.

★★★★★

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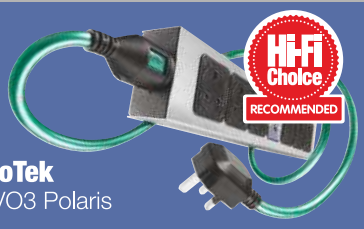

IsoTek
EVO3 Polaris

A six outlet distributor that removes Common and Differential mode mains noise. Delivers a marked benefit for dynamic range, a consequence of lowering the noise floor, as well as a general opening up of the soundstage.

★★★★★

IsoTek
EVO3 Initium

An entry-level power cable that is flexible and stylish. Once employed, there's a noticeable step up in the quality of instrument focus while clarity improves as the background becomes quieter and bass more extended.

★★★★★

FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKERS

ATC SCM40

PRICE: £4,000
REVIEWED: *HFC* 480

One of the company's more compact designs, this 40-litre three-way floorstander is a sealed box cabinet with lower sensitivity than most (necessitating a pretty muscular amp to hear it at its best). However, this is a solid, robust, powerful and gutsy-sounding speaker with plenty of insight and expansive soundstaging. Subtle and delicate enough for softer moments, it's equally comfortable going loud – displaying dramatically rendered crescendos and a fine sense of space.

★★★★★

Bowers & Wilkins 702 Signature

PRICE: £5,000
REVIEWED: *HFC* 480

Sporting B&W's tweeter-on-top, this stunning three-way comes with a glorious Datuk Gloss ebony-coloured veneer. It has a big controlled sound that fills large rooms with ease, ensuring rousing renditions of music overflowing with copious air and space and impressive soundstaging. Deft handling and plenty of punch complete the package.

★★★★½

DALI Spektor 6

PRICE: £500
REVIEWED: *HFC* 473

This *Group Test* winner positions itself at an extremely competitive price point and while it looks like a £500 loudspeaker, it sounds like it costs way more. It has a lovely natural tone, plus lots of detail and great dynamics. It sounds big, confident and expansive and yet is never overbearing or in anyway in your face. Throw into the mix a devastating combination of finesse and musicality and it's insatiable appetite for rhythm, and it's a no-brainer at the price.

★★★★★

Kerr Acoustic K320 mk.3

PRICE: £7,500
REVIEWED: *HFC* 480

This *Group Test* winning floorstander comprehensively trounced everything else in almost every way in its roundup. It boasts a tonality that's a touch on the warm side of dry alongside a soundstage of architectural precision. In other respects it has extended yet propulsive bass, a joyously open midband and a deliciously lustrous treble. Plus it makes music great fun.

★★★★★

Monitor Audio Gold 300

PRICE: £4,000
REVIEWED: *HFC* 453

The benefits the Gold 300 brings to openness, clarity, fine detail and harmonic structure is very special. Although with vividly produced material it can verge on the 'hyper real', this is a consummate crowd pleaser that more than any rival at the price sells an idea of high-end luxury and sonic excellence that's hard to distinguish from the real thing.

★★★★★

Spendor D7.2

PRICE: £4,500
REVIEWED: *HFC* 456

A crisp, open and even-sounding loudspeaker that's impressively engaging and surprisingly dynamic – especially for a floorstander at this price. There's more space around vocals and a lighter more spry sound to cymbals, making for a lifelike sound despite its ability to remain smooth and sophisticated. The D7.2 is a modestly sized, highly capable, do-it-all loudspeaker that's well worth an audition.

★★★★★

LOUDSPEAKER CABLES

Chord Company
Epic XL
£600 1.5m, terminated *HFC* 450
Combining elements of Chord's Signature Reference/XL with its Epic speaker cable, the XL bristles with energy and brings fantastic detail to the fore. Subtle elements are captivatingly clear, soundstage depth is enormous and clarity is supremely enhanced.

★★★★★

Chord Company
Odyssey X
£150 1m, terminated *HFC* 451
Made from the same materials as the Rumour X (*HFC* 447), the Odyssey X is designed to bring more control to dynamics and definition, and boy does it deliver. Front-to-back imaging is superb, instruments are well focused and clearly positioned while piano is full and rich.

★★★★★

QED
XT25
£85 3m *HFC* 434
Claimed to achieve a lowering of impedance compared with a traditional large cross-sectional area twin-core cable, the XT25 offers up great refinement and engaging musicality. Vocals are clear and full bodied, silence between phrases is eerily quiet and the noise floor is very low.

★★★★★

True Colours Industries
Storm
£22 1m *HFC* 453
This flexible ribbon cable is 2mm thick, making it ideal for hiding away under the carpet for tidy bi-wire hook-ups, while its tight and well-controlled performance reveals impressive openness with a spacious sound that's full and entirely uncluttered, even during crescendos.

★★★★★

STANDMOUNT LOUDSPEAKERS

Bowers & Wilkins
607 S2 Anniversary

PRICE: £450 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 470

More than just a range refresh, this baby box has had new life breathed into it in a rather skilful and expert way. So much more than the sum of its parts, the 607 S2 Anniversary Edition is highly engaging across all types of music, has a super classy treble and is the best B&W entry-level standmount yet.

★★★★★

Falcon Acoustics
RAM Studio 20

PRICE: From £2,000 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 446

The RAM Studio 20 clearly favours amps with plenty of grip, especially in the bass. It might not offer forensic levels of detail with which to dissect a recording, but as a wide-bandwidth, high-performance standmount that sounds easy, natural and is dripping with musical finesse, it takes some beating.

★★★★★

Fyne Audio
F1-8

PRICE: £6,000 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 473

If the F1-8 is anything to go by, size really does matter. If you're short of space, look elsewhere as this is a beast that won't melt into the background. But as a speaker that merges the strengths of the best standmounts and floorstanders, it is dynamic, dextrous and deeply satisfying with all types of music.

★★★★★

Q Acoustics
Concept 30

PRICE: £900 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 486

The Concept 30 is magnificently free of issues, places no great demand on partnering equipment and is unfussy about positioning. Combined with great looks, it is one of the very best standmounts available at the £1,000 pricepoint. Regardless of what you play on it, it's very hard to unsettle. Superb.

★★★★★

Sonus faber
Lumina I

PRICE: £800 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 477

A worthy entry point into the Sonus faber family and a genuine star in its own right, the Lumina I manages to sound bigger, more self-assured and room filling than you'd expect from looking at it. It does all this while still delivering on the virtues expected from the company and looking and feeling very pleasant at the same time.

★★★★★

Spendor
Classic 3/1

PRICE: £2,730 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 476

The Spendor Classic may not be as modern looking as some rivals at the price, but don't be fooled: that traditional design hides a superbly talented standmount able to produce a sensational blend of accuracy, scale, refinement and sheer unadulterated fun, and it's not too fussy about placement.

★★★★★

LOUDSPEAKER SUPPORTS

Atacama Audio
Apollo Cyclone 6
£100 ***HFC*** **455**
Available in a choice of three sizes so you can get the height of your cabinets correctly positioned to suit your listening position, this stand removes unwanted vibrations from the performance sharpening imaging and instrument focus for a full, refined sound.

★★★★★

Hi-Fi Racks
X50
From £180.48 ***HFC*** **453**
Solidly built, these elegant yet classy speaker stands are available in a choice of flexible customisation options, removing all colouration from the performance and giving the impression the cabinet is floating in mid-air. Great value for money and a simple upgrade.

★★★★★

IsoAcoustics
GAIA II
£300 ***HFC*** **427**
Attaching the GAIA II feet to the underside of your speaker provides a high degree of isolation that gives it the opportunity to breath and display a level of clarity and openness that's easy to hear. Music just sounds right with them in place and the price is right too.

★★★★★

Townshend Audio
Seismic Isolation Podium
From £1,400 ***HFC*** **426**
Placing your loudspeaker on to a Seismic Isolation Podium is a revelation. The way it completely removes its interaction with its surroundings is mind blowing, bringing clarity to the entire frequency range, enabling it to communicate far more effectively.

★★★★★

WIRELESS LOUDSPEAKERS

Bowers & Wilkins
Formation Duo

PRICE: £4,000 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 488

It might offer relatively poor connectivity without the Formation Audio hub (an extra £650), but otherwise this is one of the best wireless speakers around thanks to its stunning design and class-leading sound which reveals impressive levels of power and poise under pressure regardless of source.

★★★★★

Cabasse
Pearl Akoya

PRICE: £2,950 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 488

Bringing a retro futuristic touch of glamour to the wireless world, the Pearl Akoya is sold as a single speaker only – so doesn't come cheap. HDMI aside, it ticks most boxes connectivity-wise and its crisp, expansive sound ensures it will prove more than capable for audiophiles. Superlative space-age stereo at its best.

★★★★★

KEF
LS50 Wireless II

PRICE: £2,250 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 479

Combining an extensive and highly practical specification that makes it an ideal one-stop shop with a level of overall performance that is truly outstanding, the LS50 Wireless II might not be cheap, but it is unquestionably a quite superb all-in-one solution that images better than most rivals and is sonically fabulous.

★★★★½

KEF
LSX

PRICE: £1,000 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 446

It might not offer the muscle and dynamic reach of the LS50 Wireless, but the LSX is cut from the same sonic cloth. Size, style, flexibility and sound quality all impress, but it's the active ingredient which enables a performance that similarly priced passive systems will find hard to match that wins the day.

★★★★★

Q Acoustics
Q Active 200

PRICE: £1,500 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 488

With each cabinet boasting a pair of Balanced Mode Radiators – each with its own DSP and amplifier channel – this *Group Test*-winning standmount has a hi-fi like sound that's tonally neutral, smooth and well balanced. Offering a combination of great sonics, stylish design and superb connectivity, it's the one to beat.

★★★★★

System Audio
Legend 5.2 Silverback

PRICE: £2,800 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 474

A new paradigm that shatters the notion that you need a strapping floorstander for deep, powerful bass, the Legend 5.2 Silverback musters a performance that is as coherent, palpable, tonally true and rhythmically compelling as the very best available rival at many multiples of its price.

★★★★★

ONE-BOX SYSTEMS

Cambridge Audio
Evo 150
£2,250 *HFC* 477
In terms of functionality, the Evo 150 offers little over a dedicated streaming amp such as Hegel's H95. As an object of desire, however, it's on a different plane – as lovely to look at as it is to use and to listen to. There will be many takers for it.

★★★★★

NAD
M10
£2,200 *HFC* 451
With its super flexibility, powerful amplifier design, big front panel touchscreen and impressive BluOS platform, this is a supremely stylish offering. Sonically it's a very powerful and refined system while its definition and precision is in ample supply.

★★★★★

Naim
Uniti Star
£3,500 *HFC* 433
Fast, powerful and grippy with oodles of emotion and a pleasingly expressive tonality, the Uniti Star might not have the forensic detail resolution of some similarly priced rivals, but it isn't far off. Otherwise it's practically impossible to find fault at the price.

★★★★★

Novafidelity
X14
£690 *HFC* 446
Deserving of praise for the functionality it manages to squeeze into such a compact and elegant chassis, the X14's well thought out and practical approach will attract those looking to take their first steps into network audio and it makes a greater second-room setup.

★★★★½

TURNTABLES

AnalogueWorks
TT Zero

PRICE: £1,500 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 453

Pristine without being bright, the TT Zero has fine tonal discrimination and starts and stops precisely where it should. It is able to unpick all the audio strands with ease, sounding, open and airy with plenty of sparkle and bite, a low noise floor, lucid rhythmic gait and impressively clean, controlled and tuneful bass.

★★★★★

AVID
Volvere SP

PRICE: From £5,500 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 472

With its dynamic, detailed and confident presentation, the Volvere SP delivers all of the thrills hidden in your vinyl's grooves and adds a few more just for good measure. Rock solid, unerringly precise and gloriously natural, it's a triumph that combines the joys of a belt drive with the accuracy of a direct drive.

★★★★★

Linn
Majik LP12/Krane

PRICE: £3,500 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 477

For such an old design, this *Group Test* winner sounds surprisingly modern. It's not as soft and rounded as it used to be, but still retains enough of the traditional Sondek character for it to charm listeners. The result is a big, confident and enjoyable sound that's tonally a little warm but with high levels of technical virtuosity.

★★★★★

Pro-Ject
Debut PRO

PRICE: £700 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 487

Easy to setup and uncomplicated to use, the Debut PRO has been dubbed the most audiophile Debut yet. With its newly designed tonearm, TPE-damped metal feet and 1.6kg platter, it's difficult to disagree. With plenty of room to upgrade, even in stock form, this is among the very best at the sub-£1,000 price.

★★★★★

Rega
Planar 10

PRICE: £4,500 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 456

A masterpiece that is without doubt one of Rega's finest achievements, the Planar 10 manages to deliver a performance that is outstanding even at this lofty price point. Utterly unflappable, it offers incredible detail retrieval combined with a naturally low noise floor to dish up captivating vinyl execution.

★★★★★

Technics
SL-1500C

PRICE: £900 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 453

The built-in phono stage is terrific, while the take-no-prisoners sonic personality sounds joyously lively, enthusiastic and 'on it'. Thanks to its legendary torque and stability, it locks down timing and rhythm with start-stop precision and its firm, deep and expressive bass adds unrivalled impetus and authority.

★★★★★

CARTRIDGES

Audio-Technica
AT-OC9XEN
£300 ***HFC*** **452**
This *Group Test*-winning moving-coil cart utilises an elliptical nude stylus mated to an assembly using two coils rather than one – which is something of an A-T trademark – and balances excellent performance with a useful boost to user friendliness, thanks to its threaded body.

★★★★★

Hana
Umami Red
£3,400 ***HFC*** **483**
Translating from Japanese as 'brilliant" and 'gorgeous', this *Group Test*-winning low-output moving-coil cart more than lives up to its name. It sounds beautiful with a superb combination of power, poise, musicality, detail and insight, and makes music sound utterly magical.

★★★★★

Michell
Cusis S
£1,275 ***HFC*** **479**
With a wonderfully refined but potent performance, this *Group Test*-winning moving-coil cartridge has user-friendly dimensions and stunning bass. The result is that it is deftly able to deliver a superb performance with a variety of different musical styles and setups.

★★★★★

MoFi
UltraGold
£1,500 ***HFC*** **485**
This good-looking medium-output moving-coil cartridge from the US record label retains the warmth and air we've come to expect of MC offerings, but partners it with the sort of impressive trackability you'll struggle to match at the price. A real smooth operator.

★★★★★

PHONO STAGES

Chord Electronics
Huei

PRICE: £900 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 459

The Huei's appeal extends from its rock-solid build and playful, sphere-based control system to its impressive knack of extracting the best from a turntable/cartridge combo without being too painfully honest about the ropier aspects of less-than-pristine recordings.

★★★★★

Hegel
V10

PRICE: £1,300 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 474

It might be fiddly to setup and ensuring you pick the best combination of DIP switches for your cartridge isn't the most of intuitive of processes, but the V10 is effortlessly smooth, gloriously insightful and impeccably voiced for a crystal-clear performance with a wide range of different MM or MC pick-ups.

★★★★★

iFi Audio
Zen Phono

PRICE: £150 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 476

An astonishing performance and superb flexibility. Until you find yourself at the price where features like adjustable loading and capacitance are possible, the spec for the asking price is outstanding. This is one of a tiny number of designs anywhere near this price that can do justice to pretty much any cartridge under £500.

★★★★★

Musical Fidelity
M6x Vinyl

PRICE: £1,700 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 475

This multi-talented design offers a superb combination of excellent connectivity, versatile loading and gain options, a great user interface and excellent sound. Tonally it's very neutral with a crisp clean and spacious tone that's less euphonic than some may like, but nonetheless fun to listen to.

★★★★★

Pro-Ject
Phono Box RS2

PRICE: £1,300 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 481

The RS2's transparency is genuinely impressive, even judged at the price and its lack of colouration is potentially very useful indeed. This is the product you buy when you're already satisfied with the tonal balance of your system and simply need a well-specified phono stage to complete it.

★★★★★

Tom Evans
MicroGroove+ X mkII

PRICE: £1,000 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 469

The closest thing the UK has to a phono stage guru, Evans designed the circuit for this stunning stage in 1989. Unapologetically plain, light and unassuming, the MicroGroove cuts the sonic mustard like nothing else to make even mid-priced turntables sound far higher end than they actually are. Superb.

★★★★★

IN-EAR HEADPHONES

Audeze
LCDi3
£900 *HFC* 478
Clarity, subtlety and coherence meet scale, air and an utterly compelling sense of dynamic freedom on this stunning *Group Test*-winning planar magnetic in-ear. With great poise and even handedness, it never gives the impression of trying too hard.

★★★★★

Oriveti
OH500
£500 *HFC* 451
Combining an airiness with low-end extension that most rivals can only dream of, the OH500's stylish resin enclosures house four Knowles balanced armatures (two for bass and two for the midrange) with an 8mm dynamic bass driver for an enjoyably vivid performance.

★★★★★

Sennheiser
IE 900
£1,100 *HFC* 478
If dynamic dexterity and resolution that would shame a spy satellite are what you crave, the IE 900 scours the noise floor like few other in-ear offerings at the price. Articulation, separation and drive are equally impressive while treble extension and refinement are superb.

★★★★★

Bowers & Wilkins
PI7
£349 *HFC* 478
The first pair of True wireless in-ears from B&W does a supreme job of capturing fine details and stitching them into a wider whole. Bass extension is deep without being at the expense of speed and noise cancelling works without effecting the tonal balance.

★★★★★

HEADPHONES

Audio-Technica
ATH-M50xBT

PRICE: £180 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 450

Taking its M50x and turning it into a very capable wireless design (thanks to Bluetooth v5.0) without altering its sonic character, Audio-Technica has come up trumps here. Balance and refinement join crunching bass, impressive three dimensionality and decent noise-cancelling to seal the deal.

★★★★★

Bowers & Wilkins
PX7

PRICE: £350 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 486

Although it's no match for a high-end wired design, the noise-cancelling abilities of this wireless closed-back model are ideal for music on the move – offering an elevated listening experience amidst the hustle and bustle of the city. An essential audition if you're serious about enjoying your music out and about.

★★★★★

Philips
Fidelio L3

PRICE: £300 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 486

This wireless noise-cancelling headphone *Group Test* winner ticks pretty much every box at the price. Boasting aptX HD, a 38 hour battery life and decent noise cancelling, it is well built and comfortable. And while the accompanying app makes operation a doddle, the music just flows in an easy going, unforced way.

★★★★★

Rosson Audio Design
RAD-0

PRICE: £2,500 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 481

A largely viceless implementation of planar magnetic headphone that delivers the commendable virtues of the design with very few of the downsides. Comfortable and well made, the RAD-0 sounds absolutely superb.

★★★★★

Sennheiser
Momentum 3

PRICE: £350 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 455

With a Bluetooth performance that makes it hard to believe this is really a wireless offering, the Momentum might just be the most consistently entertaining performer Sennheiser has ever produced. Excellent design, fabulous features, subsonic bass and impeccable noise cancelling complete the package.

★★★★★

T+A
Solitaire P-SE

PRICE: £3,000 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 477

Shaving as much as 40 percent off the price of its flagship P headphone, while retaining more than 60 percent of the capability, this is a stunning open-back, planar magnetic T+A offering. It might be expensive, but the sheer levels of performance and the quality of the build and design mean it is one of the best.

★★★★★

PORTABLE DACS

AudioQuest
DragonFly Cobalt
£270 *HFC* 463
With a relatively low 24-bit/96kHz sample rate, expectations for the Cobalt aren't high until realising it means there's no need for USB driver software. Native MQA decoding is also supported and the open and richly detailed sound make this the best DragonFly offering yet.

★★★★★

Chord Electronics
Hugo 2
£1,800 *HFC* 428
An essential audition, the Hugo 2 is not just a portable DAC/headphone amp, but the best hi-fi digital converter available at or near the price. Music ebbs and flows along in an organic and unforced way and it images with stunning pinpoint precision.

★★★★★

NEW ENTRY

Chord Electronics
Mojo 2
£450 *HFC* 488
It might be £50 more than its predecessor, but the follow-up Mojo makes the superb original sound opaque, coloured and closed-in by comparison. Prepare to experience complex textures, limpid transparency, striking stereo and unnoticed details like never before.

★★★★★

iFi Audio
xDSD
£400 *HFC* 439
Justifying its inclusion on sound alone, the xDSD delivers a wide variety of musical styles with admirable clarity and precision. It's engaging, lively sonics and versatile connectivity make it equally adept for mobile or desktop use and the only minor downside is its battery life.

★★★★★

Hi-Fi Choice Reader Classified

Welcome to *Hi-Fi Choice* Reader Classified, a free private ads service for buying and selling second-hand hi-fi components.

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FOR SALE

TASCAM DA-45HR digital audio tape deck. Drum hours 1,753. £750. AKAI GX-636 reel-to-reel stereo tape recorder. £1,400. Both in excellent condition. Price includes shipping: **e-mail mjcm4p@gmail.com (Gloucestershire).**

PRO-JECT 2 Xperience Classic Acrylic boxed, but no cart £320. Mitchell Technoarm £400 ONO with mounting plates for Rega and Mitchell GyroDec. Neat Motive 1 Rosewood finish, there are some chips to the veneer, £400 ONO: **07444 891217 or email: georgemoraitis2002@yahoo.com. (NE London).**

ATACAMA Nexus 6i speaker stands (satin black) and tub of Atacama Atabites. As new. £50. Collect only. **01529 304908 (Lincolnshire).**

NESPA professional optical disc finaliser mint condition with manual £395. AudioDesk Systeme CD Improver VGC £150. Cash on collection: **07708 431963 (Crewe, Cheshire).**

NAIM Nait 1 (Red LED). Totally original amplifier in good condition. Reluctant sale. Sounds superb £390: **07410 408954.**

CLEARAUDIO 300Hz calibrated strobe and 12in test disc. Professional set-up tool for the discerning amateur audiophile or for the professional workshop. Never used £95 inc p&p: **07976 606369 or email: Sws999@btinternet.com (Devon).**

VERTERE Pulse-B analogue RCA 1.65m interconnect cable (RRP £949). Boxed as new £400: **07979 080525 (Lancashire).**

ICON AUDIO Stereo 40 mkIII with Jensen caps and recent valves £800 ono. Buyer collects: **07531 835575.**

QUAD ESL988 loudspeakers in black. Superb condition, full service history, with mains leads, instruction manual and original boxes and fillers £1,000 ono: **01827 284023 or 07855 579797 (Tamworth, Staffs).**

SONY ST-SDB900 tuner, VGC with remote control and manual, fully working order, silver finish. £100 or near offer plus postage: **01902 733821 or email: malcolmcostley@hotmail.com (West Midlands).**

NAIM NAC-N172XS streaming preamplifier. Unmarked. Full Naim service November 2021. Complete with original packaging & accessories £900: **07748 334704 or email: dave@davedeeks.com. (North Tyneside).**

BOWERS & WILKINS CM9 floorstanding speakers in black and in excellent condition. Great sound and they work very well with a range of amplifiers. Boxed, service manual, plinths and rear plugs £950: **01539 732006 or email: lindamarycott@btinternet.com (Cumbria).**

PRIMARE i30 amp (black) £750, Primare CD31 CD player (black) £750. Both boxed with remotes: **0208 4649055 or email: billmilla@virginmedia.com (Bromley, Kent).**

LEAK Stereo 20 power/preamp, dark grey £500: **07988 081094**

CYRUS X-Power amps x2. Owned from new, immaculate condition, boxed, brushed black. Both come with Kimber power cords and QED RCA interconnects £1,200: **email: ben1972rees@gmail.com (Bucks).**

CAMBRIDGE 651 MM/MC phono amp £75. Audio-Technica 33EV MC cartridge £135. Marantz PM6004 amplifier £75. DALI Zensor 1 speakers £75. Sansui SAP201 amp/DAC £75. Pioneer PDR609 CD player/recorder £75. Hi-Fi magazines free to collect: **01691 610589 (Shropshire).**

SONUS FABER Electa Amator speakers complete with original wood/stone stands. Exceptional condition £1,750: **07741 416584 (Lincs).**

FOCAL Utopia headphones £1,800 ono. Not a lot of use as I prefer to listen through loudspeakers: **01656 733354 or email: pauldavies242000@yahoo.co.uk.**

NAIM Uniti Mk1 serviced by Naim in 2018 and upgraded to 24-bit/192kHz spec, unmarked condition with all supplied accessories and box, £700: **07788 975856 or email: tyl590@aol.com (Gloucestershire).**

CYRUS DAC-X brushed black, excellent condition, boxed £450: **email: rachel_2290@hotmail.com (Berks).**

MICHELL GyroDec SE turntable with Origin Live Encounter 3C arm. Michell Orbe platter kit. Sensible offers only please. Cash only, buyers collect. Near M25/A21. **Email: billytkippington@gmail.com**

ICON AUDIO MB845 Mk.1 monoblock amplifiers. Upgraded to SE version with new Mundorf capacitors. New

BUYING TIPS **BUYING SECOND-HAND** can be a great way to pick up a bargain. A formerly expensive second-hand component might well prove a better long-term bet than a brand-new product if the price is right. **DO SOME RESEARCH** on which brands have a good service back up, so if something does go wrong, you can get it fixed. Unless you purchase from a dealer, you're unlikely to get any warranty, so it's up to you to ensure the fitness of any gear that you buy. **USUALLY** speakers should be less prone to breakdown than amps, and amps should be more reliable than CD players. But any abused component could be trouble – have a proper demo and judge the seller as well as the goods!

845 valves on one amp. Boxed. Great powerful sound. Sensible offers: **07717 752288 or email: captain_b99@yahoo.co.uk (Bristol).**

MUSICAL FIDELITY A1 amp (2008 version), with USB, MM phono stage, 36W. Excellent condition, remote and manual. No box, so collection only, £425: **07398 642586 or email: Johnakeanelangley@gmail.com**

ART AUDIO Concerto MKII 50WPC valve power amp. Also, Music First transformer-based preamp. All in immaculate condition. £1,500 and £600, a great combo which I can split: **01981 242067 or email: treesurglee@aol.com (Monmouth).**

CAMBRIDGE AUDIO CXN V2 streamer, lunar grey, excellent condition and light use. Original box and remote: £500. Collection only: **01280 469852 or email: davidsangster53@gmail.com. (Buckingham).**

REGA Planar 8 turntable with Apheta 3 MC cartridge fitted. Only 9 months old. All original packaging included: £1,950. Collect only: **07910 387221 or email: philbailey46@gmail.com (Epsom, Surrey).**

DYNAUDIO Evoke 10 standmount speaker new last December. Offers invited: **01825 722936 or email: stewartandjoy@gmail.com (Sussex).**

AURALIC Altair wireless streaming DAC/preamp. Silver, VGC, box, brochure and remote £800. Macintosh Super Audio CD/DAC 550 cost £8,500 for sale £4,000. VGC, box, brochure and remote: **07725 818438 or email: jonniejpc@msn.com (London).**

QUAD Artera Solus just back from Quad with full software upgrade. Mint condition, black, boxed £795: **0208 6949350 or email: alan-charlesworth@sky.com (London).**

ICON AUDIO SMFV3 speakers. Unmarked. £850. Pro-Ject Xperience Classic turntable olive wood, new lid, GoldNote cart £795. Tisbury Audio Domino phono amp. Barely used £130. Denon DL103 cart, never used £255. All manuals boxed and excellent condition: **07771 807042 or email: vincehumphreys@hotmail.co.uk (Lancashire).**

QUAD II classic integrated valve amplifier. Gold finish, excellent condition with leads and instructions, can demo, £1,900: **07704 145987 (am only) or email: norbertstefan@yahoo.co.uk (Bedfordshire).**

AUDIO-TECHNICA ATH-70 electret condenser headphones. Vintage pair of headphones in good condition and with original packaging, £45: **email: petersharples20@gmail.com.**

LINN Sondek LP12 with Ittok LV11 tonearm and K9 cartridge: £1,500. Pair Linn Keilidh speakers: £200. Creek 5050 amplifier: £100. Mint condition: **07754 084481 or email: helen.a.marshall24@gmail.com (Guildford).**

SENNHEISER HD 800 headphones for sale. Mint condition for £600: **01656 733354.**

REGA P3 £195, Goldring Eroica moving-coil £99. Both little use/very good condition. Lyra Delos moving-coil cart, old but good/careful use £99. LSA1 standmounts, slight cosmetic damage to one, but sound great £175. Buyer to collect: **0790 5501265 or email: john.harris61@btinternet.com (East Sussex).**

MUSICAL FIDELITY A370 power amplifier, Class A, 185W, fully functional with exception of bulb in on/off switch. Cosmetically very good with no scratches or dents. One owner. £1,000 ono: **01789 842336 (South Warwickshire).**

THORENS TD 321 turntable with Linn Basik LV X and Nagaoka MP100. Little used for many years. Offers please to: **07463 572804 (Leics).**

NORDOST Blue Heaven AC UK mains lead, 1.5m, as new boxed £120. SliC Eclipse C MK111 XLR interconnect 1m as new boxed £170. 2x Naim PowerLine Lite mains leads as new £20. iFI AC iPurifier UK version as new boxed £50 **email: stevecousins136@gmail.com (Dorset).**

REGA Planar 3 (black, Eighties) with RB300 and AT-OC5 £295 with cartridge, otherwise £245. Rare Sawafuji SFI-10 three-way pair, walnut £345. Audiolab 8000SX (black, Eighties) £195: **email: sn.banks@ntlworld.com (Hitchin).**

AUDIO RESEARCH LS28 preamplifier, mint condition with box and manual, buyer to collect £3,950: **07913 236601 (Manningtree, Essex).**

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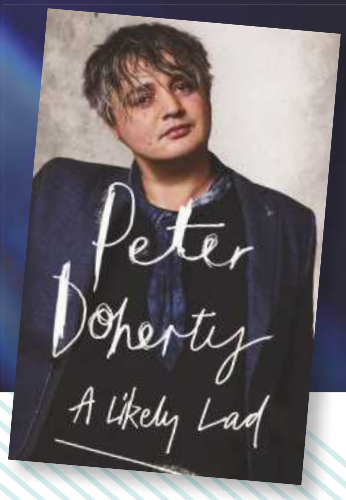


REASONS TO BE CHEERFUL

Exciting things coming your way in the month ahead

1 LITERATEEN

Pete Doherty of The Libertines, Babyshambles *etc.* will publish his first memoir this month via Little, Brown Book Group. Written with Simon Spence, *A Likely Lad* promises to take readers inside the chap's: "creative process, decadent parties, substance-fuelled nights, his time in prison and tendency for self-destruction". Yowsa!

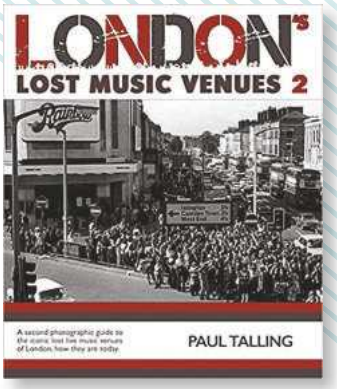
2 NEW COLOURS

French manufacturer Triangle is issuing a limited edition of its AI0 3 speaker in four new finishes: Powder Pink, Frost White, Green Forest and Red Ocher. There's also a new EQ feature available on the TRIANGLE AIO app, which will allow you to adjust the bass and treble of all the AIO speakers connected to the networks directly from your phone. Amazon Music is additionally integrated into the AIO app, expanding the range of supported streaming platforms, which already includes Deezer, Spotify, Tidal, Qobuz and TuneIn. Finally, the AIO 3 2022 Edition integrates OTA-certified over the air automatic updates to implement the latest features and patches of the AIO app automatically without manipulation. Owners of older generation speakers can access this update via a process detailed on the Triangle website: trianglehifi.com.

3 GHOSTS OF GIGS

Damaged Goods Books is publishing author Paul Talling's *London's Lost Music Venues 2* on 23 June, the second volume of the photographic guide to the capitol's iconic lost live music venues. The first volume, issued in 2020 during the initial lockdown, featured over 100 lost smaller venues from all over London and this second volume covers 140-plus venues from the past, focusing on the larger halls and theatres of London's musical heyday.

Venues remembered and honoured include Hammersmith Palais, the Rainbow Theatre, the Astoria, the Borderline, the Lyceum, the Cellar Club in Kingston and tons more with 292 pages of images, flyers and modern-day photos of what these venues are now. It's priced at £15 and you can order a copy from: damagedgoods.greedbag.com



4 CHANGING ROONS

Roon, the music management, discovery and streaming platform, has just announced over 40 new audio devices from the likes of Arcam, Astell&Kern, Cyrus, McIntosh, NAD, Onkyo, Pioneer and Sonus faber have achieved Roon Ready or Roon Tested status since the beginning of the year and, in celebration, the company has created its own official online store. "Over time, we've received more and more questions from users about which products have this or that feature, which would be better for a bedroom versus a patio or which offers the best value at a particular price point," says Roon founder and CEO Enno Vandermeer. "All that interest has inspired us to think about how to provide a new service for Roon users. Shopping for audio gear online isn't especially easy or fun, so we decided to do for the audio shopping experience ▶

GOLD NOTE'S UPDATED WEBSITE MARKS ITS 10TH ANNIVERSARY

TRIANGLE'S AIO 3 SPEAKER NOW COMES IN FOUR NEW FINISHES

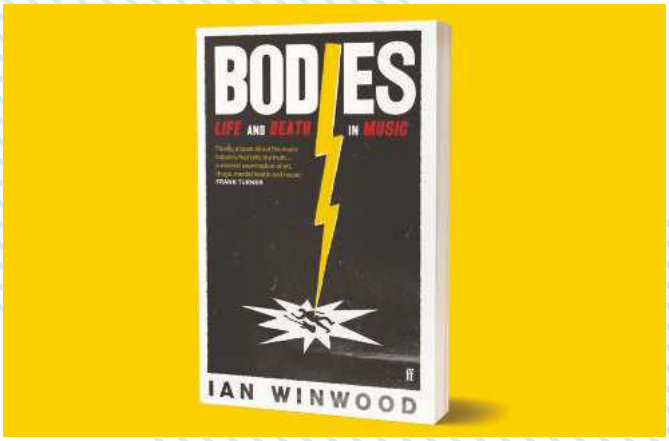
what Roon itself did for music browsing and discovery." The new online store, which includes video tutorials and insights about the features and performance of each product, launched with a limited selection of products in a single category: the all-in-one Roon Ready speaker, featuring models from Bluesound, Devialet and Dutch & Dutch – with more coming soon. You can also buy Roon's own Nucleus and Nucleus Plus (*HFC* 439)music servers from the store at: store.roonlabs.com

5 TRIBECONS

Those readers lucky enough to be heading over to New York in June might like to check out the Tribeca Festival, which runs from 8 to 19 June. Debut screenings include *Hallelujah: Leonard Cohen, A Journey, A Song*, described as: "a deep dive into the titular song within the context of Cohen's transformation from a poet to a songwriter, according to press materials", and *Angelheaded Hipster: The Songs of Marc Bolan & T. Rex*, a documentary which combines archival footage with reflections from Gloria Jones, Ringo Starr, Nick Cave, Hal Willner, Joan Jett, David Bowie, and others. More info at: tribecafilm.com/festival.

6 THE HARM IN THE HARMONY

Music journalist Ian Winwood's fantastic book *Bodies: Life And Death In Music* has just been published in paperback by Faber & Faber for £12. According to the *Sunday Times* reviewer it's: "A robust analysis of the music industry's apparent death drive... Winwood draws on his decades of interviewing bands in dressing rooms and tour buses – not to mention his own bracingly described drug hell – to examine why the industry attracts so many people vulnerable to addiction and mental health problems." Cripes!



7 GET IMMERSED

Italian high-end audio specialist Gold Note is celebrating its 10th anniversary with some exclusive online action comprising How It's Made, a new mini-series on Youtube dedicated to taking you behind the scenes in the creative process of the company's products. There's also a new, dedicated anniversary website where the company says: "Users are involved in a synesthetic experience aimed at 'showing' the sound, materialising its invisible essence into animations that turn abstract forms of gold metals, kinetic sand, and space matter into the concrete shapes of the most iconic Gold Note products". You can browse the immersive website at: goldnoteanniversary.it.

8 HOME 3D

Sennheiser has just released its all-new AMBEO|OS to provide AMBEO Soundbar users with what the company claims is: "an even more immersive 3D home audio experience". Additionally, Sennheiser has completely updated its Smart Control app with a new intuitive user experience with a view to giving soundbar and headphone users: "effortless sound control and personalisation".

AMBEO|OS is available for all AMBEO Soundbars and supports Apple AirPlay 2, Spotify Connect and Tidal Connect. Sennheiser claims: "By utilising wi-fi rather than Bluetooth Low Energy to connect to the Sennheiser Smart Control app, the user experience is faster and more responsive. The operating system also guarantees greater security and stability." AMBEO|OS can be accessed through the completely rebuilt Smart Control app created to enhance the functionality of Sennheiser's headphones, including Sound Check and Sound Zones. Sound Check guides users through three easy steps to find the perfect EQ preset according to their tastes. Sound Zones let True Wireless users tailor EQ settings, Noise Cancellation and Transparent Hearing to defined places – whether home, the office or on the go – and adjust audio settings according to the user's location and surroundings.

The Smart Control app also includes an intuitive equaliser, pulls up digital user manuals, and provides the latest software and firmware for Sennheiser consumer products. Users can also opt to control their AMBEO Soundbar via the dedicated web interface. The free software and firmware update has gone live to all Smart Control and AMBEO Soundbar users ●

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Next Month

AUDIOLAB OMNIA

The new all-in-one just-add-speakers stereo system that's got you covered whether you're after hi-res digital audio streaming, vinyl or CD. In short, our reviews says it's: "An outstanding new arrival in the all-in-one category that offers excellent performance across a wide spread of connections." Get the full low-down next month!

ALSO:

REVIEWS JBL 4305P Studio Monitor bookshelf speaker, Rotel RA-1592 MKII amplifier, Rosso Fiorentino Elba 2 floorstanding loudspeaker, Grado SR325x headphone, Lypertek PurePlay Z5 true-wireless noise-cancelling earphones, plus a *Group Test* of affordable in-ears.

FEATURES Music Legends, Music Reviews, Reasons To Be Cheerful, our comprehensive Buyer's Guide and sharp-as-nails Opinions pieces, all the latest kit release news in Audiofile and all your hi-fi questions answered by our experts

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